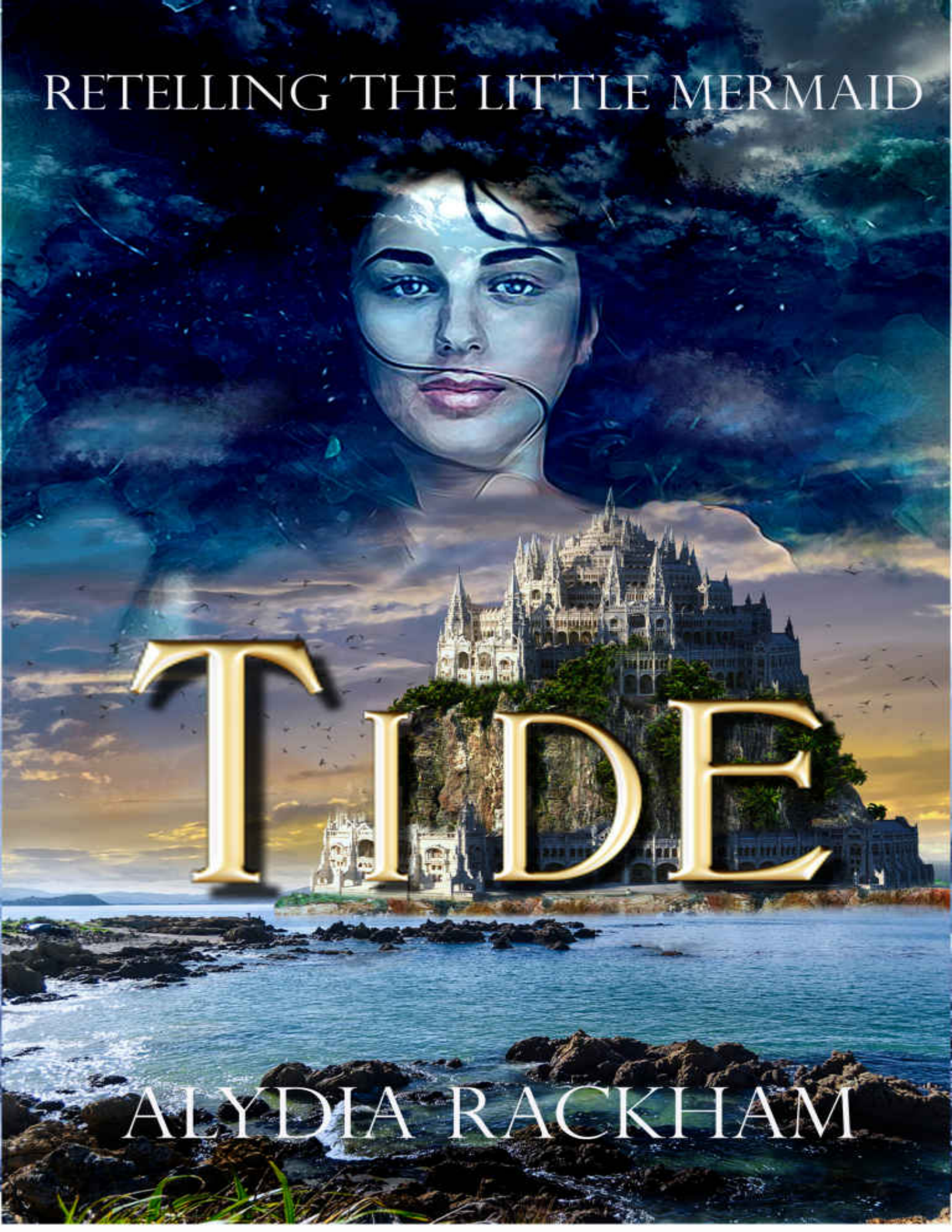
RETELLING THE LITTLE MERMAID
TIDE
ALYDIA RACKHAM

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Tide

Retelling the Little Mermaid

A
Curse-Breaker's Tale

Alydia Rackham

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Chapter One

A lone, black figure stood upon the crest of a hill, astride a muscular horse—equally black. The young rider's cape twisted out behind him, borne on a cantankerous wind that had wound its way up through the craggy valley from the sea. That same wind disturbed the long, rolling mane of the horse, sending it writhing across the rider's gloved hands—and it troubled the rider's shoulder-length, ebony hair.

The young rider turned his pale, scarred face toward the towering forest wall to his left, as his steed's shod hooves shifted and scraped against beaten stone. Even at the distance from whence he stood, he could feel an unearthly cold wafting out from between the gnarled fir trees. And though steely clouds covered the sky, he could glimpse the dark sparkle of frost amongst the branches.

Frost. In summer.

The young man narrowed his black eyes and set his jaw.

"Cryck!" The throaty, creaking cry echoed through the shallow valley from above. The rider glanced up to see the familiar form of a large, tattered raven swoop past, and glide ahead of him toward the deepening of the cleft in the hills. The rider adjusted his grip on the reins, and, giving one last black look at the border of woods, urged his horse down the hill.

He balanced easily as his mighty horse trotted down the wide gravel road, ignoring the cut in the wind—so different from the sun-soaked, sweeping hills he'd recently left behind. He passed down through the gully, and urged his steed into a canter. The long sword at his side beat a rhythm against his thigh, and his cape slapped the horse's hindquarters. The raven overhead gave another absent squawk, and flapped his wings against the breeze.

Within an hour, they left all sight of the woods behind, and the gully opened up to a broad moor dotted with rugged heath and exposed stone. The sun shattered the clouds here, spilling down in waterfalls upon the earth below. And at the edge of this moor, the earth fell away, and the sea spread like a glittering carpet all the way to the horizon—interrupted only by a set of islands, the foremost island striking a vast and soaring form against the brilliance of the water.

The rider leaned back and gently tugged on the reins, slowing his horse to a walk. He paused, taking a deep breath of the briny air, then glanced again to his left, and found the white road that wound down to the fishing village.

The rider gave a sharp whistle.

The raven cawed, and swung around midair, dove, flapped his great wings, and landed expertly on the rider's right shoulder. The raven pecked at the rider's long hair, and ruffled his feathers.

Without giving more than a cursory command to the horse, the rider sent him into a canter again, and the three of them started down the rolling hills. Hooves clashed steadily against broken rock, and the roar of the wind increased, rushing through the rider's clothes.

At last, they dipped into the shelter between two cliffsides, and old trees rose up around them. Ahead, the rider caught sight of smoke rising from chimneys. The road turned to packed dirt, and to either side, two-story, grey-stone houses appeared, with bright windows, and blue, red or green doors. The scent of smoked fish soon rolled out to meet him, along with the smell of burning wood. Bustling noise arose, accompanied by the dull, deep roll of the ocean swells.

He turned a corner and entered a broad lane busy with working people and carts and horses and donkeys. The plain-clad folk carried wood, grain, ropes and fish in baskets, they shouted to each other, they rang silvery bells that hung from doorframes.

He slowed his horse. The raven gave a quiet cluck-cluck-cluck. The horse lowered his head, and stepped through the crowd, careful where he set his mighty hooves.

They followed the curve in the road, and at last achieved a downward ramp that led to the broad beach, where crowds of women in hiked-up skirts plied the sands for clams. Seagulls flitted like wisps of cotton, diving and swirling over the breakers, crying and calling into the sky.

The rider and his raven maneuvered all the way to the end of a stone dock, where several beaten sailing vessels were moored. Hooves now clattered on stone, and the gusts of wind billowed out the rider's cloak. He made his way to the very end of the dock, where a single, larger ship, much more finely-painted than the others, swayed with the tide. Several sea-battered, ruddy men stood upon the deck, winding rope and polishing the

wood. They wore dark blue uniforms and white kerchiefs, and three of them heartily sang a sea chantey that the wind tried to steal away from them.

"Oh, the work was hard and the wages low
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
I guess it's time for us to go
Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!

Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Oh, the voyage is done, and the winds don't blow
And it's time for us to leave her.

I thought I heard the old man say
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Tomorrow you will get your pay
And it's time for us to leave her

Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Oh, the voyage is done and the winds don't blow
And it's time for us to leave her…"

One of the three singing men caught sight of the rider, and stood up straight. He had a short-trimmed white beard, and curly white hair that stuck out from beneath a brimmed cap. He stopped singing, and beamed a wide smile that wrinkled his weathered face as he cast his blue gaze up and down the horse and rider's towering black forms.

"Well…What a sight," the sailor remarked. "What a sight, indeed."

The other sailors immediately stopped what they were doing and looked up, as the rider gazed back down at them, his great cape rolling behind him, his raven hunching upon his shoulder, and his horse lifting his proud, grand head. Their mouths opened, but none were able to speak.

"You're…you're Galahad Stormcrane," one of the younger sailors finally spoke up, stepping forward. "The Curse-Breaker. The one we're to take to Metern?"

"I am," Galahad said, sat back, and swung down from the saddle. He landed easily, his raven flapping to compensate. He turned and unstrapped a saddlebag, reached in, and pulled out a rolled up piece of parchment. He

stepped up to the side of the small ship and handed the scroll across to the older man—the captain.

“Thankee,” the captain said as he took it. Gripping hold of it with both hands as the wind tried to snatch it from him, he unrolled it and read it. “Aye, yes,” he concluded, looking back up at Galahad with another smile. “I’m Captain McNeil, and this is His Majesty’s the *Essa*.”

“Thank you,” Galahad nodded, turned and grasped his horse’s bridle, and led the great animal toward the edge of the boat. Alarmed, the sailors stepped back.

“Do he need a—” McNeil started—

And the huge horse kicked off, leaped over the rail and onto the deck with a shaking thunder. The raven squawked in comment. Galahad hopped in after, as the horse snorted and tossed his head.

“What great black beasties ye have,” the younger sailor comment. “What be their names?”

“This is Thondorfax,” Galahad slapped the horse’s neck. “And this is Scraw.”

At the sound of his name, the raven let out a loud *crack* sound. The sailors laughed breathlessly, still shying clear of Thondorfax’s massive shoulders.

“You’re a tall lad yourself,” the captain noted, glancing him up and down. “A good head taller than my son!”

“How long till we make sail?” Galahad asked, turning to scan the sea.

“Not but a few minutes,” the captain answered, tugging on his cap. Galahad just nodded, reaching out to grasp Thondorfax’s reins again.

Comments and gasping were quickly replaced by the bustle of activity on deck as they reeled in the anchor, pushed away from the dock, and made sail. The white canvas flapped slack in the wind before the captain turned the rudder and the sails snapped to. In no time at all, they had pulled away from the dock, fore into the waves, and the little ship rocked smoothly like a galloping horse. Cold spray splashed up over the rail, dotting Galahad’s cheeks.

As the crew worked, they gave Galahad and his animals a wide berth, but soon they began laughing amongst themselves again, and once more started to sing.

“The wind was foul an' the sea ran high,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
She shipped it green an' none went by.
An it's time for us to leave her!

Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Oh, the voyage is done, and the winds don’t blow
And it’s time for us to leave her.

The grub was bad an' the wages low,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
But now once more ashore we'll go.
As it's time for us to leave her!”

They picked up speed as the waves and wind arose. Gusts blasted across the deck, but the sailors only sang louder.

“Oh, leave her, Johnny, an' we'll work no more,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Of pump or drown we've had full store.
An it's time for us to leave her!

Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Oh, the voyage is done, and the winds don’t blow
And it’s time for us to leave her.

Leave her, Johnny, an' we'll leave her with a grin,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
There's many a worser we've sailed in.
And it's time for us to leave her!”

On either side, several smaller boats floated or sailed, the men aboard throwing nets out or pulling them in. The *Essa* sailed between them, toward the great island that waited about two miles off shore. As they passed over the surf, the sea smoothed, and the little ship leaned easily as the gale carried her. Thondorfax braced his shoulder against the mast, and Scraw huddled down against Galahad’s neck. The chilly gusts tried to slice through his clothes, but his heavy shirt, trousers, boots, tunic

and waistcoat wouldn't allow it. Galahad rested his free hand on the silver butt of his sword, lifted his chin, and fixed his eyes on the far shore.

In swift time, the ship approached the coast of the island, but the captain pulled her to port, and they skated the edge of the jagged shore northward. Huge white cliffs leaped up from the beaches, and waves shattered against toothy rocks. Galahad's gaze swept the green upper edges of the cliffs, and he said nothing.

An hour later, they rounded the curve of the island and headed northeast. They sailed past a little fishing village in a cleft—one that the captain pointed to, and declared it to be called Megipesk. Another half hour brought them around a short peninsula…

And there it rose up before them.

Galahad drew in a slow breath.

Atop the height of a great hill by the rim of the cliff stood a white castle. It had domed-roofed towers, elegant archways, and pillars that looked like unicorn horns. The domes shone blue, with tiles of lapis lazuli. Stripes of gold shimmered atop the lintels of the arches. Tall windows, paned with unbreakable silvery glass from Spegel, flashed back the sunlight. Designs of ships and great sea creatures adorned the smooth walls in relief. Seagulls soared around its peaks like snow.

"Perlkastel," the captain announced, the pride evident in his voice. "Only to be rivaled by the Palace of Glas in Spegel. Or so they say. I've never seen that one, myself."

"Nor I," Galahad murmured, his attention still fixed on the ornate battlements.

The captain shouted orders, the sailors adjusted the canvas, and the ship turned toward shore—toward a carefully-built harbor lined with fine stone buildings. They drew up to the dock's side, and let down the anchor.

As soon as he could gauge it, Galahad leaped out of the ship and landed on the dock. With a great heave and another snort, Thondorfax followed, crashing down right beside him, throwing his head. Scraw barked at him.

"Thank you," Galahad said to the captain, hopping back up into the saddle, setting his boots in the stirrups and taking up the reins. "I will tell His Highness you performed your duty well."

"Thankee, sir," the captain tipped his hat. "Good luck, sir."

Galahad didn’t respond. He just turned Thondorfax’s head and clicked to him, and the horse took off at a brisk trot up the dock. Scraw beat his wings and took off, sailing ahead again.

Galahad trotted onto the beach, up the white rocks, and onto the central lane of the village. The people here wore much finer clothes, of sea-green and blue colors, with hats on their heads. They didn’t shout, but walked beside each other—and all of them turned to watch Galahad as he passed through their midst. Scraw crowed, and Thondorfax picked up his speed.

Together, they worked their way up the ever-inclining, windy road, following the cliffline, occasionally passing shepherds driving their white herds. Then, the road turned to paving, and trees flanked it. Old trees, with thick green canopies. The wind rushed through their leaves, and unseen birds chirped in their branches. Galahad lost sight of Scraw as he soared over the leafy heights.

The wide lane wound gently across the hills, leading ever upward. And at last, the trees opened up to a huge terraced garden. A large fountain stood in the center of each terrace, each fountain taking the form of a nymph or a sea god or a mighty fish. Blooming roses surrounded the fountains, each terrace a different color. The heady scent washed over Galahad as he started up the drive toward the massive, waiting arms of the castle.

He followed the lane directly through the gardens, onto a large, paved yard, and drew up on front of the tall, elegant, iron black gates tipped in gold. Two guards, wearing shining silver helmets and white uniforms, stepped out from their towers to meet him.

“Greetings, sir. State your name and business,” said the guard with the mustache.

“I am Galahad Stormcrane, Curse-Breaker,” Galahad answered him. “I must speak with Prince James.”

He saw the guard’s eyes go wide, and he exchanged a glance with the other soldier.

“Stormcrane?” he stammered. “Yes, yes, right away, sir. If you’ll dismount, I’ll personally have your horse—”

“No,” Galahad cut in. “He comes with me.”

The guards balked.

“What—inside the palace?”

“Yes.” Galahad leveled a look at the mustached guard. “Or are your doors too small?”

“Why…Why no, sir, they’re quite wide—”

Galahad turned from him toward the palace.

“Then open the gate.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard hurried back, and with his comrade, they opened the gates. Not waiting for them to fully open, Galahad and Thondorfax marched inside, with Scraw flapping overhead. The raven then dipped down and landed on Thondorfax’s head. Galahad dismounted, let go of the reins and strode forward. The great horse followed right behind, his head ducking low. More guards quickly heaved open the double doors and Galahad passed through, Thondorfax and Scraw after him, into a large, white, pillared hallway with gorgeous mosaiced floors. At the far end waited a vast room flooded with light off the sea. Thondorfax’s heavy hooves clacked loudly against the smooth stones. And together, they entered the room.

The ceiling soared. Murals of ethereal humans dancing through the clouds covered the spaces between the arches. Glittering crystal chandeliers —more glass from Spegel—hung like a rain of diamonds. Floor-to-ceiling windows made up the entire wall, looking out over the glimmering channel and then the green, misty mainland. The floor was polished tile, alternating black and white squares. Galahad moved to the center of the room, turned to his right, and faced the head of the room, where a golden dais stood below a wall-covering tapestry. Thondorfax drew up behind him, and his shoulder touched Galahad’s. The horse’s great neck curved, and his body enshielded Galahad on all sides save the fore.

And the two people that stood upon the dais twisted to see them.

One was clearly an advisor—a middle-aged man dressed in simple, floor-length red robes.

The other was a young, vividly-handsome man—perhaps five years younger than Galahad—whose countenance shone like the light off the water. He had short, golden hair, brilliant blue eyes, and laughing features. He wore a silvery blue doublet, blue trousers and white hose, with diamonds sparkling on the buckles of his shoes. He saw Galahad, who stood encompassed by his towering beasts—and dropped his book.

The volume *smacked* against the steps of the dais, and the young man jumped.

“Good lord,” he cried, scrambling to snatch it up, then gripped it in both hands as he gaped at Galahad. “It can’t be.”

“Prince James, son of the late king Orion, nephew of King Leonardo?” Galahad said, his low voice echoing in the tall chamber.

“Yes,” the prince nodded earnestly, frowning.

Galahad solemnly met his eyes and evened his tone.

“I have come to warn you that your kingdom will soon be attacked.”

Chapter Two

The prince almost dropped his book again. He exchanged a startled look with his advisor, then stepped down the dais toward Galahad.

“Truly?” he said. “What…What news do you have to suggest that?”

“I’ve come from the Fortress of Maith,” Galahad answered. “The masters there watch over Edel’s Seven Seals—the seals laid down by the first Curse-Breakers to guard Edel from Curse-Makers from other shores.”

“Yes, I have heard of them,” the prince nodded earnestly. “There is supposed to be one just out my window, in fact. In the sea.”

“Yes, there is,” Galahad replied. “And on a clear day, I imagine you can see it under the water. A huge circle, perhaps a mile wide, of dark stone?”

The prince watched him intently.

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Each of these seals has a guardian,” Galahad told him. “His life is bound to the seal, and he’s to guard the seal and keep it strong.”

The prince glanced back at his advisor again before turning back to Galahad. His pale face had flushed red.

“That…is the first I have heard of that,” he confessed. “Is it…Is it supposed to be a member of the royal family?”

“On the contrary,” Galahad said. “The guardian only has one task. And, for some reason that none of the masters can understand…your guardian has vanished.”

The prince blinked, and his eyebrows shot up.

“What? Who is it? What happened to him?”

Galahad shook his head again.

“I don’t know the answer to either question. But one thing is certain.” He took a step closer to the prince. “Without him, the seal—and also your kingdom—are vulnerable to the dark powers of the sea, and whatever may lay beyond that. And it may be…” he lowered his voice. “…that the reason for the guardian’s disappearance is an imminent attack.”

The prince swallowed.

“I see,” he murmured. He shifted his weight. “You should know that my erm…My uncle, the king, is ill.” He looked up at Galahad, his eyes bright and open. “He is…He is not here.”

“Yes, I know,” Galahad said flatly. “He is at the Halls of Healing, but he is not doing well.”

The prince watched Galahad, the color leaving his face, then nodded slowly.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

“Which is why I bring this news to you,” Galahad finished. “And to request your permission to stay in the kingdom of Mhuirlan, and even on Metern, until I can uncover what has happened to your guardian.”

“Oh, good lord, yes,” the prince said in a rush, and slapped the spine of his book. “Yes, please, please stay. As long as you like. Erm, in fact…” he glanced at his advisor again before taking a deep breath. “We have accommodation for a Curse-Breaker. My uncle made me aware of it last spring. It’s a house called Euryor, just down the hill, on the cliffs. It’s kept up by a groundskeeper and a maid, furnished and everything.” The prince tried to smile. “It’s only about a mile away.”

“I’m sure it will be sufficient,” Galahad said.

“More than that, I hope,” the prince laughed. “In fact, I’ll ride with you myself, and show it to you. You must be ready to take some rest.”

“Thank you,” Galahad inclined his head slightly.

“Garrick, have them ready my horse,” the prince ordered his advisor. The advisor bowed and left the room through a side door. The prince looked past Galahad at Thondorfax.

“And what a magnificent animal you have here,” he remarked—and without reserve, stepped right up to Thondorfax and vigorously petted his neck. Galahad’s attention instantly sharpened…

But Thondorfax just nickered and bumped the prince lightly in the chest with his nose. Scraw hopped nimbly down to the horse’s shoulders and gave a squack. The tension in Galahad’s shoulders eased.

“Scraw believes you were talking to him,” he noted.

“And so I was!” the prince grinned up at the large bird, then slapped Thondorfax’s flank. “Both are equally splendid.”

Scraw replied with a frank *“blick!”* and canted his head, studying the prince with one bright eye. Then the prince briskly turned to Galahad.

“Shall we go?”

The prince, astride a sleek white horse with black mane and tail, decked out with grey tack, led the way down the terraced garden lane, with Galahad, Thondorfax and Scraw just beside. They turned a slightly different direction than Galahad had come, and passed into a cultivated wood of firs and beeches. Thondorfax huffed, pranced, and strained at his bit. The prince glanced over at him.

“Is he not tired from his journey?”

Galahad snorted.

“Thondorfax is never tired.”

“Well then,” the prince sat up and gathered his reins in his gloved hands. “Stell hasn’t been out in a few days. Do you mind if I stretch his legs?”

Galahad looked over at the prince, and quirked an eyebrow.

The prince grinned at him in challenge.

“Hyah!” the prince slapped his horse’s rump, and the steed took off.

“Blahk!” Scraw barked, and took off straight into the trees.

Without urging, Thondorfax lunged after Stell.

Galahad easily leaned forward and wound that thunderous mane through his fingers, his own body flowing right with his horse’s as the great Friesian caught up to the prince’s smaller steed. The rumble of their hooves echoed through the wood, and hundreds of surprised birds burst up out of the hedges and branches.

They raced up and down several short hills, then passed through a gate in a large stone wall, and out onto the moors. The wind whipped through their capes and the manes of their mounts. The road turned into a beaten carriage track, and each man rode upon one wheel mark, side by side. At a full gallop, they swept over the rolling, heathy wilderness, passing copses of gorse, the salty wind ripping across the hills.

Galahad glanced over at the prince. The other young man kept his seat extremely well, riding with familiarity and comfort, even at this blinding speed. The prince looked at Galahad, and Galahad instantly saw the prince was gauging him in the same way. The prince’s smile broadened, and he leaned forward…

And the horse Stell shot forward—even faster.

Galahad blinked, then lightly squeezed Thondorfax's flanks with his heels.

Thondorfax whinnied, tossed his head, and blazed after the other horse, immediately catching up. The prince laughed out loud, let go of the reins, and threw his arms out to either side. Stell kept galloping at full tilt, as his prince kept his seat as easily as if their bodies were one.

Scraw's shadow crossed over them, as the two riders began their descent, down the face of a hill toward a gathering of four weathered trees, and a stone house and barn standing amongst them. The prince gathered his reins back up again and leaned back a little in the saddle. Stell snorted but slowed down. Thondorfax followed suit. They passed between two short trees and into the yard in front of the house.

It was a simple, old-built, two-story house of light brown stone, with a simple front door and narrow windows. It had a slate roof and two chimneys, one of which puffed smoke out to be instantly carried away by the wind. Ivy crawled up one side of the house's face. Across the yard from the front door stood a stout, thick barn with a thatch roof. Chickens clucked and pecked at corn meal in the yard, and a goat wandered through the barn door.

Galahad drew Thondorfax up in front of the door, and cast his gaze up across the house. To the right stood a leaning woodshed, to its left, a walled garden with a wooden front gate. Galahad's hands relaxed on the reins, and he let out a small sigh.

"This is Euryor," the prince declared, swinging his leg back and hopping off his horse. "Come inside."

Galahad stayed where he was for a moment, then climbed down and clapped Thondorfax on the shoulder. The horse rattled his bridle, then turned to nose the chickens out of the way to eat some of the corn meal. Scraw landed on Galahad's shoulder, and Galahad followed the prince up to the front door. The prince rapped his knuckles against the black-painted wood. A few moments later, the door swung open, and a short girl stood there, perhaps sixteen years old. She had brown hair bound back under a white cap, and wore a grey dress and white apron. She had a pleasant, round face, large brown eyes, and freckles. Freckles that were immediately drowned in a blush as she dipped into a low curtsey.

"Your Highness!" she gasped, and then threw herself out of the way, holding the door open.

“Thank you,” the prince said, stepping up into the entryway. Galahad stepped up after him, his head barely passing beneath the low lintel. Scraw ducked, too.

Galahad paused a moment to let his eyes adjust. The floor inside the entry hallway was polished flagstone, covered by a pale, plain rug. It was dim, just lit by the outside light coming in from other windows.

“Galahad Stormcrane, this is Little Emblyn, the housemaid,” the prince gestured to the maid, who dipped another curtsey, her eyes wider than ever.

“S-Stormcrane?” she gasped. “The Curse-Breaker?”

“Yes,” the prince chuckled. “He’s going to be staying here as long as he needs, to conduct business. Please make him comfortable.”

“I will, Your Highness,” she promised, redder still.

“Here is the sitting room,” the prince said, passing through the doorway to their left and into a small but airy room with a carpet and a few pieces of furniture, and a painting of Perlkastel hanging over the white mantel. The walls were whitewashed stone.

“Through here is the library, which I think you will find the most interesting,” the prince remarked, striding on ahead through the wide doorway. Galahad followed him into a tall-ceilinged room filled with dark-wood shelves that were positively packed with volumes. The ceiling had been painted with a mural of a cloudy sky cut by streams of sunlight. Cherubic figures had been carved into the posts of the shelves, and several of them held out lit lamps in their hands. The far wall bore two tall windows, with long curtains. A fine woven rug covered the floor, and padded leather furniture stood around the strong stone fireplace. A fire now burned in the hearth, and above the mantel hung a broad painting of a battered, torn ship rolling upon a stormy sea.

“That’s the *Cygnus*,” Galahad noted quietly, stepping closer to peer at it. Then, he turned and regarded the prince. “The ship your father was aboard when it was lost.”

“Yes,” the prince offered a brave smile. “My mother never wants to see that painting again…but I couldn’t bear to throw it out. So I brought it here.” He shrugged stiffly. “My aunt tells me it will bring bad luck to the family.”

“Nonsense. It’s just a painting,” Galahad murmured, studying the lines of the art again.

“My father collected all kinds of books,” the prince said with a short sigh, stepping back and glancing around. “And, as you probably know, he was friends with Clanahan Curse-Breaker, so Clanahan sent him a good many volumes.”

“Did he?” Galahad faced him, then frowned up at the hundreds of tomes that lined the shelves. “That could be useful.”

“Come, let me show you the rest of the house,” the prince beckoned, and left the library the same way they had come in. Scraw croaked, and jumped off Galahad’s shoulder and perched on the back of a chair. Galahad flashed his eyebrows at him, and left to follow the prince.

They trailed back through the sitting room, into the entry hallway, and across into a medium-sized dining room, with a simply-made, rectangular table with benches and adorned with candlesticks and garlands. An iron chandelier hung from the ceiling, and light came in from the window to Galahad’s right.

“Dining room, and through here is the kitchen,” the prince pushed the door aside to reveal an old-fashioned but large kitchen.

Little Emblyn stood at the sink, and when the door swung open, she yelped and dropped a pan straight into soapy water, and splashed all over.

The prince ducked back, letting the door fall shut, and chuckled.

“Poor girl, she’s too used to being by herself.”

With that, he left the dining room again. Galahad gave the room another cursory glance, then came after the prince into the entryway and then up the creaking flight of stairs that led directly to the second level. They turned to the left and into a narrow, whitewashed passage. They passed one door on the right, turned a corner, and then found a door to the left. The prince opened it, then gestured to Galahad.

“After you.”

Galahad dipped his head, and entered.

“This is the master bedroom,” the prince said. “I hope you find it comfortable.”

“Mm,” Galahad grunted as he looked around.

The walls had been whitewashed and then painted a faded red, with no windows, just paintings of faraway landscapes, lit by lamps. A narrow fireplace stood in the far left-hand corner, and a four-poster bed stood to his right. The carpet on the floor and the blankets on the bed were deep scarlet.

A chair and writing desk sat near the fireplace, and a trunk at the foot of the bed.

Galahad stepped inside, unstrapped his sword from his belt, and laid it across the bed.

"You sound as if you believe what your aunt said about bad luck," he mused, crossing the room to look at a painting of a copper mine standing upon a cliff, its smoke stack reaching to the leaden sky. "Yet you ride as recklessly as a schoolboy."

Behind him, the prince laughed, then cleared his throat.

"Well, I…"

Galahad turned and looked directly at him. The prince's smile faltered.

"I might say that…my aunt's experiences and my own differ somewhat."

"How so?" Galahad wondered.

The prince suddenly looked paler, a trapped look in his bright eyes. He swallowed hard, and he pinched the thumb of his left hand in the fingers of his right. Galahad waited.

"A fortnight ago," the prince began—much unsteadier than before. "I was traveling home from the island of Hanter-broder, and my ship was caught in a storm."

Galahad's brow furrowed, and he came back toward the prince, listening.

"Between the islands of Hanter-broder and Hanter-hwor there's a ring of protruding stones called Serpent's Pass," the prince went on. "It's difficult enough to navigate in calm waters…but it was night, and the seas had picked up, and it had begun to rain. It was impossible to see them." The prince swallowed again. "The ship was driven straight into them. Completely smashed to pieces. All the crew lost."

"How did *you* survive?" Galahad pressed.

The prince suddenly laughed, and shook his head.

"I…I don't know," he admitted. "The next morning, I found myself lying on the beach of Hanter-hwor, unharmed. And the only thing I remember…" he trailed off, and gave Galahad a hesitant look.

"What?" Galahad asked.

"I remember…arms," the prince said quietly. "Arms taking hold of me. And a voice. Singing. And when I heard it…I forgot to be afraid."

"The voice and arms of a man?" Galahad asked carefully.

“No,” the prince answered. “A woman.”

Galahad said nothing. For a long moment, he held the prince’s gaze. Then he nodded.

“I see. And this is why you feel you can be reckless.”

“Well, not reckless,” the prince corrected. “But…ever since then, I have looked at the world through new eyes. Before this happened, I used to fret over petty details, and treat people carelessly. Now, small, simple things give me pleasure, and I see beauty all around me.” The prince now searched Galahad’s face. “Do you understand what I mean?”

“I do,” Galahad nodded. “That feeling will pass.”

The prince laughed.

“I doubt it.”

Galahad considered, then nodded again.

“Let us hope not,” he said. “But I am thankful you survived.”

“You believe me, then,” the prince wanted to clarify. “I’ve…I haven’t told *anyone* what I’ve just told you. I feared they would think I’d gone mad.”

Galahad lifted an eyebrow and tugged off his cape.

“Of all the tales I have ever heard, and the things I have seen,” Galahad said. “That would be the least strange.”

“Truly?” The prince’s eyebrows went up. “Well…I should like to travel with *you* sometime!”

“Unfortunately, I never travel with anyone,” Galahad replied, tossing the cape onto the bed. “Would you mind showing me the barn?”

Chapter Three

Master Reola,

I have arrived safely on the island of Metern. The journey was uneventful, and I met with no trouble on the road. Passing by the southern border of Spegel, however, I did pause to look past the trees, and I could see frost inside the wood. I confess I am still uneasy about sending little Rose Melhorn to address that curse—especially if she is to deal with an ice fairy in the full height of her power. I am not far from Spegel's eastern border, even now. Should she need my assistance with anything, she, or you, need only send word.

I have met Prince James, who is amenable, and open. He accepted what I told him without any pretense, and seems willing to listen, even if he is naïve. He has personally installed me in a house near the palace, and it is comfortable, and well-stocked with many of Clanahan's books—as I have learned from the prince that the former king and Clanahan were close friends.

I plan to ride to the palace tomorrow morning and speak to the prince again, and ask him for a guide to take me round the island so I may better navigate on my own. I must work quickly. As we discussed, I have every expectation of finding the guardian of this seal to be dead. I will waste no time in discovering how he died, and why. If you hear of anything, send it on.

Give my regards to Effrain and Clanahan.

Your servant,

G. Stormcrane

Galahad set his quill aside, folded the letter, and sealed it with the red wax he had pulled from his writing kit—stamped it with his family crest: a hammer and anvil. Then, he left the study, strode out through the sitting room, into the entryway, and out the front door. His boots crunched on the gravel.

Scraw trotted through the front yard with the chickens, pecking at the corn meal. Galahad took a breath and whistled sharply.

Scraw's head came up, then he took to flight. He blazed straight toward Galahad, Galahad held the letter out to the side—

Scraw snatched it in his beak and shot up into the sky. As Galahad watched, the bird gained a sweeping height—

And with a blinding flash like lightning, he shot off and disappeared. He would arrive at the Fortress of Maith within the hour.

The soft evening light swam across the waves as Galahad and Thondorfax walked down the beach. Galahad moved ahead of his horse, who followed him without saddle or bridle. The waves rushed over the sand, foaming around the rocks, as the ocean breathed and sighed and muttered. The wind had calmed, and the sky had cleared. Galahad's booted feet made shallow prints on the high, smooth sand as he gazed out across the channel to the rolling green mainland of Mhuirlan. White sails dotted the faraway water, and seagulls followed the boats.

Galahad paused, taking a deep breath of the cool, salty air, letting the absent wind rustle through his clothes and hair. Thondorfax pressed up next to him, and both regarded the west, where the sun dipped below the horizon.

Sensing a soft light behind him, Galahad turned and caught sight of a full moon, faint and pearly in the pale blue of the sky, but even as he gazed up at her, her light brightened.

Thondorfax made a noise. A high, quiet whinny.

Galahad's head came around, his attention flashing to his horse.

Thondorfax's ears had perked up high, his attention fixed on something near the point where the beach met the feet of the cliffs. The horse drew in deep breaths, his nostrils flaring, his eyes unblinking.

Staying still, Galahad followed the horse's captivated gaze. For a long moment, though he scoured the edges of the rocks, he saw nothing.

Then.

A figure. Huddled back against a large rock.

Galahad started forward.

Thondorfax made another plaintive sound, and eagerly followed him. Galahad's pace quickened. He maneuvered around a group of tall rocks coated in lichen, then stopped.

A young woman. Sitting curled up with her knees to her chest, her arms wrapped around her middle. Her bare arms and legs were white as the moon, as was her face. She wore nothing. She had long, knotted dark hair that hung down all around her, covering her chest. She stared at him. She had large eyes, grey as the winter sea; long lashes, and black eyebrows. She had delicate, elegant features—a perfect nose and full lips, but they were colorless.

“Hello,” Galahad said carefully.

She twitched, and then started to shiver. Her wide gaze flickered past him, to Thondorfax.

Galahad turned his head slightly, and exchanged a glance with his horse. Thondorfax whuffled, lowered his head, and let his lips go slack as he shuffled toward her. He kept nickering softly, his nose almost on the ground, and nuzzled her knee.

Suddenly, she smiled.

Though her face remained deathly white, the expression lit her features with unexpected beauty. Shakily, she reached out and touched the horse’s muzzle. Her smile faded.

Galahad slowly pulled off his cape. He held it out in front of him, but did not move forward. She looked up at him again. He gazed back at her, and lifted his eyebrows.

Her lips parted. But she didn’t speak.

Galahad took one step forward. Her breathing picked up, but she didn’t move. He took another step forward. She slid her hand up, and tightly wound her fingers through Thondorfax’s forelock. Cautiously, Galahad knelt down before her, and just held the cape up. She breathed quickly, like a rabbit, her attention flicking between him and the garment. Galahad waited.

Finally, her attention stopped flashing back and forth, and found him again. Her brow furrowed. He leaned forward, and draped the cape over her knees. Then, he let go, and sat back.

She blinked, and released Thondorfax. Gingerly, she stretched out a hand and grasped the edge of the cape, and drew it closer to her chest. She pulled the hem up to her face, and pressed it to her lips, all the while, watching him.

Galahad sat back on his haunches, studying her. As he did, he tugged off his gloves, and pushed them into a side pocket of his trousers. The girl

focused on his long, bare hands, now, as he rested his wrists on his knees.

Then, Galahad held out his right hand—his sword hand—to her, palm up.

Thondorfax whuffled again, leaned out and lipped his hand, mistakenly searching for a sugar cube.

The girl chuckled.

The sound reminded Galahad of the waves upon the sand.

Galahad's own lips parted as he looked at her, but he didn't say anything. Thondorfax realized that there was nothing in Galahad's palm, and shuffled back, but not before nosing him in the shoulder. Galahad kept his hand where it was.

After a moment, the girl leaned forward slightly, frowning down at his palm. Then, she risked her own right hand, and brushed his fingers. Her touch was cold. He didn't withdraw.

Her interest sharpened, and her left hand joined her right. She lightly grasped his hand, and turned it to reveal the deep scar on the back of his hand between his thumb and his forefinger. Her fingertips wandered over it, and then found the scar on his smallest knuckle. Galahad just watched, chills washing up his arm.

Her hands stopped moving, and she lifted her face. He met her eyes. Her eyebrows drew together, and something like decision marked her features. Then, carefully, she turned her own right hand over, palm up. Galahad looked down…

To see a black rune upon the palm of her hand.

He instantly snatched her hand, his eyes going wide, and stared down at it. Then, his attention flew to her face.

Her breathing hitched. She swallowed.

Galahad swooped over her. He swiftly took up his cape and bound it around her body, then scooped her up in his arms. She grunted, but she didn't kick or hit him. He turned, and in three steps he mounted one of the tall rocks, then leaped off the peak. He landed astride Thondorfax, securing his hold on her. Thondorfax waited for him to settle her before starting forward at a smooth gait.

The sky darkened all around them, and the moon shone bright in a purple sky as they swept back up the beach, and started up the steep and winding road to Euryor House.

“Little Emblyn!” Galahad called, kicking the front door out of the way and striding into the house. The housemaid emerged from the dining room, wiping her hands on her apron, and gasped.

“What—Who is this?”

“I found her on the beach,” Galahad said, stepping past her and into the dining room. “She is cold, and wet, and I doubt if she’s had anything to eat for several days.”

“I’ll make up a bath for her!” Little Emblyn cried, shoved back through the kitchen door, snatching it open so that Galahad could follow. He felt the strange girl shivering in his arms as she looked wildly all around her.

“She’s terrified!” Little Emblyn realized. “Here, set her on this bench by the range—I’ll fetch the

bathtub—”

“Where is it?” Galahad interrupted.

“In the pantry, there,” Little Emblyn pointed.

“I will get it, you start warming the water.”

“Yes, sir.”

Galahad bent down and set the girl lengthwise on the padded bench, and tucked his cape closer around her. Her frightened gaze caught his for an instant before he left her and crossed the stone kitchen floor to the back room and pulled open the door. There, against the far wall, beside the larder shelves, stood a small copper tub with claw feet. He bent over it, picked it up and hauled it back out the door. It was heavy. He set it down in between the girl and the range, even as Little Emblyn heaved a large crock of water onto the stove.

“Do you have clothes that will fit her?” Galahad panted, straightening up.

“Erm…no sir,” Little Emblyn glanced over the stranger’s form and then shook her head. “She’s a deal too tall for my clothes. But there are lady’s clothes in one of the upstairs bedrooms, sir. Some of those dresses are bound to fit.”

“Which bedroom?” Galahad asked, swiping his hair out of his face.

“The first door you come to, sir, straight ahead from the stairs,” Little Emblyn answered.

Galahad didn’t answer, just left the kitchen, and headed up the stairs to dig through the trunks.

Galahad stood over a table in the library, his hands braced on the wood. His head hung low, and he stared down at the large, open book before him. A glass oil lamp burned beside it, casting all the rest of the room into deep shadow—and light upon the ancient pages.

A map of Mhuirlan, and the Teylu Crown Islands…

And the great seal on the bottom of the Sira Channel.

Its perfect ring stretched from the coast near Perlkastel all the way across the channel to the shores of the narrow part of Mhuirlan.

And right in the center of it stood a single rune.

And he had been staring at it ever since he opened to this page.

"Sir?"

Galahad straightened, turned and looked toward the open door of the study. He saw Little Emblyn silhouetted against the lamp in the sitting room.

"Sir, I've dressed her and sat her down at table, but she doesn't seem to know what to do with the soup or the bread…"

Galahad didn't answer, just shut the book and picked it up, and carried it toward the door. He stepped past Little Emblyn, his jaw tightening, moved through the sitting room and into the dining room, his heavy footsteps ringing on the floor.

The girl sat on the other side of the table, in front of a steaming plate of food. She wore a plain maroon dress with fitted sleeves and scoop neck. Little Emblyn had somehow worked out all the tangles and knots in the girl's dark, twisted hair—doubtlessly with a handful of olive-oil—and her tresses now hung in gentle waves down to her waist, shining in the candlelight. A little color had come into her cheeks, and her grey eyes had brightened.

When she saw him, her mouth opened—but again, she said nothing.

Galahad stopped, took a short breath, and inclined his head.

And he spoke in an entirely different tongue.

"Greetings Princess Meira—daughter of Strom, King Under the Water."

Chapter Four

The girl—Princess Meira—blinked, and sat up straight. Confusion filled her eyes, and her brow furrowed.

Galahad stepped forward and laid the book down on the table, never breaking her gaze.

“I am Galahad Stormcrane, a Curse-Breaker,” he said, still speaking the foreign tongue. “I was sent here to discover what has happened to the guardian of the eastern seal.”

Princess Meira’s mouth closed, and she swallowed. Galahad leaned toward her.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” he said quietly, searching her face. “You are the guardian of the seal.”

Meira’s jaw tightened, and she nodded.

“Can you not speak?” Galahad asked.

She hesitated, then shook her head.

“But you can understand Brimtung,” he said. “So you are, indeed, Merfolk.”

She bit her lip. And she nodded.

“And you are the princess,” he went on. “Eldest daughter of the king.”

She nodded again.

Galahad glanced to his left. Little Emblyn stood there near the kitchen door, eyes wide with bewilderment as she watched the exchange. Galahad turned back to Meira.

“Someone put you under a spell to make you human,” he concluded. “To bind you to the land so you cannot protect the seal.”

Meira opened her mouth once more, then tilted her head to the side and halfway shook it, then lifted her right shoulder. Galahad watched her a moment.

“Is some of that true?”

She nodded.

“Which part?” he asked.

She paused, then held up one finger.

“The first part,” Galahad said slowly. “Someone has put a spell on you to make you human.”

She nodded.

“But it was not to gain access to the seal,” he finished. She shook her head.

Galahad said nothing for a long moment, then straightened up and gave her a sideways look.

“You asked for the spell.”

Her face lit up, and she nodded quickly. Galahad’s eyes narrowed.

“Why?”

Meira looked around the room helplessly, lifting her hands—then pressed them both to her heart, giving him an imploring gaze.

Galahad’s jaw tightened, and his hands closed.

“Were you the one who saved Prince James from his shipwreck?”

Meira jerked. She shot a glance at Little Emblyn, then turned back to Galahad.

Then, she nodded.

Galahad ground his teeth, turned to the side, and covered his mouth with his hand.

Finally, he faced Meira again, and set his hands on the table.

“You’ve fallen in love with the prince,” he said tightly. “And you want to be human, to be with him. Regardless of the *danger* it brings upon the entire realm of Edel and the surrounding seas.”

Her eyes flashed—but something like fire blazed in them. Galahad didn’t move.

“Why can you not speak?” he demanded. “Could you speak before you accepted the spell?”

She nodded.

He eyed her.

“Who took your voice?”

Her face flushed red, and her hands closed to fists on the table. She turned to stare resolutely at her soup.

Galahad moved the bench and sat down on it, then flung the book open. He scanned through the pages swiftly, the light from the lamps glowing against the ancient runes and maps and monastic writing.

And then, he finally fell upon a particular page—and all the lights in the room flickered.

Little Emblyn whimpered.

Galahad stared down at the open book.

Upon the right-hand page stood an illustration of a lean form draped and hooded in shredded darkness. It was the figure of a bony woman, her white hands like claws, her face enshrouded. In her right hand, she held up an iron lamp that glowed with a blue flame. Her bare feet trod upon men's bones and the cadavers of shipwrecks. Within her cape and skirts, toothy fishes tangled as within a net, and sharks swam in her wake.

And upon the left-hand page, it read thusly:

Myrkur

Myrkur, the sea witch

Ancient and Malevolent being of the undersea, Bringer Of squalls and hurricanes, shipwrecks and Doldrums. She feeds upon the dead
That sink to the depths.

She is not a Curse-Maker, but a Curse-breather. She was released from The under-earth by A splitting of the sea floor at the shattering of Atlantis,
and she brought darkness andturmoil to the Heart of the seas.

She taught many original Curse-Makers, Including Gwiddon Baba Yaga.

She is kept from flooding the land of Edel And throwing tempests down upon it Only by the power of the Mer-king, Strom, and The seven Seals of Edel, laid by The seven original curse-breakers.

Galahad lifted his eyes, and looked directly across at Meira.

"Is this her?" he asked quietly. "The one who gave you the spell?"

Meira had lost all her color again, and stared fixedly at the illustration. Her jaw tightened.

Galahad pushed the book away from him and sat back.

"You asked Myrkur to give you a spell to make you human." He watched her calmly. "Did you know what she was when you did this? Did you know that, above all, she would take delight in killing you and eating your bones?"

Meira's gaze flew to his, but her eyes burned again.

"Oh, you don't think she will," Galahad realized, lowering his head but eyeing her. "You think she'll keep her promises. And what were her

promises, exactly? I doubt it was just an even exchange: your voice for her spell."

Her cheeks flushed once more. Galahad leaned forward.

"What was it? Your life?"

She swallowed again, and nodded. He frowned.

"And yet you are still sitting here, alive. What is the catch? Is there something you hoped for? Something that would prevent her from taking your life?"

Meira hesitated, then slowly lifted her left hand. And with her right, she pointed to the ring finger on her left hand.

"Oh," Galahad murmured. "You have to marry him. The prince. That's it, isn't it? If you marry him, you'll be able to speak again, and you will live the rest of your life as a human."

Meira drew in a deep, shaking breath, and nodded yet again. Galahad tilted his head.

"And what happens if, say, he marries someone else?"

Meira didn't move—but her lower lip trembled.

Galahad rolled his eyes, and tossed the book shut.

"You'll die, won't you? If he doesn't marry you, and marries someone else, you will die." Galahad pushed the bench back and stood up. "This has now become my problem. You will stay here in this house until I have solved it." He grabbed the book, and turned swiftly toward Little Emblyn—who jumped.

"This woman is formerly a mermaid, transformed by the Sea Witch. She's only been human for a few days," he said, switching back to the Edeltung language so Little Emblyn could understand.

"I…*What?"* Little Emblyn gasped.

"She will be staying here, and you will attend to her. She is a princess," Galahad went on. "But she doesn't know how to eat with utensils or plates or bowls, so you will teach her to eat as you would a small child. It would be best if you ate with her and taught by example."

"Yes…Yes, sir," Little Emblyn stammered.

"I will be in the library," Galahad strode out of the dining room and into the sitting room. "Do not disturb me."

Galahad pushed open the side pane of one of the library windows, and Scraw hopped in, bearing a tightly-folded letter. Galahad took it from him, and the great bird flapped noisily in and perched on a footstool near the fire. Galahad shut the window, broke the seal on the letter, unfolded it and read it as he paced back toward the light of the hearth.

Galahad,

I am grateful that you have arrived on Metern safely. How does Thondorfax like the ocean? It's been a long time since he's been able to run through the waves, hasn't it? I'm pleased that the prince seems like a good man. I was fond of his father, and his grandfather, though his great-grandfather was a bit of a stick-in-the-mud.

Rose has reached the palace of Glas without incident, and it is as we suspected: buried in ice and snow, and Queen Iskyla of Iss is sitting at Prince Nikolas' right hand. Unfortunately, Rose's welcome was not as congenial as yours: Prince Nikolas has threatened her with death if she doesn't cure his headaches. Of course, it is illegal to harm a Curse-Breaker, but he may not know this. In any event, Rose is equipped with Dust Boots. I do worry for her, but I still believe her temperament is ideally suited to this problem. I assure you, however, that should she require help, you are the first person I will send for.

Please write the moment you have word of the guardian of the seal, and what has happened to him or her. If you need any of us to come to you, let us know—the protection of that seal is vital.

Always,

Reola

Galahad folded the paper back up and tucked it into his inside pocket, then moved to the writing desk. He swiftly lit the lamp, pulled out a fresh piece of paper, took up the quill, and began to write.

Reola,

I just received your letter a minute ago, but since you commanded me to write right away if I had discovered what happened to the guardian, I will.

Just this evening, as Thondorfax and I were scouting the beach, we came across a young woman, naked and battered and unable to speak . I soon discovered a rune upon her hand: the ancient rune for M. I realized that she is Princess Meira, daughter of King Strom. A mermaid. I took her back to the house with me, had her bathed and dressed by the house maid, Little Emblyn, and I attempted to speak with her. She can of course understand Brimtung, but cannot answer out loud. By asking yes and no questions, I was able to confirm that she is, as I suspected, the guardian of the Eastern Seal. I further discovered that she has taken a spell from Myrkur, the Sea Witch, to make her human. Princess Meira has fallen in love with Prince James, whom she recently rescued from a shipwreck . However, as I soon learned, the witch Myrkur took Princess Meira's voice in exchange, and also placed a Rule upon the spell: Princess Meria must marry the prince, or she will die. And if the prince marries someone else, Princess Meira will die.

This is a blatant trap. The witch Myrkur has designs upon the seal, arranged the prince's shipwreck, and then took advantage of Princess Meira's attachment to the one she rescued. After all, the witch has placed Princess Meira in an impossible situation. How, after all, can a young woman with no fortune, no property, no breeding, no knowledge of court, and no language hope to win the favor of a royal prince? Worse than that, this may be a Love rule—which would require the prince not only to marry her, but to love her. Now that I think on it, I believe this is the case here—because that's exactly what I would do if I were a Curse-Breather and I wanted to make certain that the guardian died.

I would rather not confront Myrkur, for dealing with her is to deal with Diabhal. I am instead going to attempt to work Myrkur's curse against her—for this spell's characteristics certainly match those of a curse. I will give Princess Meira a Teanga potion, so she can at least understand everyone, and I will dress her and teach her, and introduce her at court. I mean to give her every advantage, and persuade Prince James as best I can to form an attachment to her. I will not tell him the truth about her, as a marriage of pity could prove fatal.

If you have any further suggestions as to how I ought to proceed, please share them.

Your servant,

G. Stormcrane

Chapter Five

Tap, tap, tap.

Galahad's head came up from his book. He sat near the tall window in the library at the writing desk, poring over the book he had referenced last night: *The Seven Seals of Edel*.

He turned to see Little Emblyn in the doorway—she'd rapped on the doorframe.

"Begging your pardon, sir. The princess is dressed and ready," Little Emblyn said. "May she come in?"

"Yes, thank you, Little Emblyn," Galahad answered. The maid dipped a curtsey, then turned aside to let the young woman behind her pass by.

Princess Meria cautiously stepped into the study, and into the light that came in from the windows. She wore a plain green dress with a white sash and long sleeves. Her hair had been braided behind her, and the dark plait hung down past the sash. She wore simple brown slippers, and no jewelry. She didn't look as pale as yesterday—she had color in her lips, and her grey eyes were as bright as ever. She came to a stop in the center of the room, and clasped her slender hands together. She bit her lip.

Galahad considered her for a moment, then shut his book and stood up. He faced her, but didn't advance.

"I've sent a letter to the master Curse-Breakers at Maith about what you've done, and the predicament we all now find ourselves in," he said, his voice low and even, as he spoke in Brimtung again. "I have no doubt that their concern will be sharp and severe."

Her jaw tightened, but she didn't break his gaze.

"However," he went on. "I have also assured them that I will do everything I can to make certain that Myrkur does not gain control of that seal. And at the moment, the only way to do that is to begin a courtship between you and Prince James, encourage him to fall in love with you, and wed you before his uncle or any of his advisors can choose a wife for him."

Her eyes flashed, and she blushed again—and a hint of a smile danced across her mouth.

Galahad folded his arms, and took three slow steps toward her. “You have appealing looks and the bearing of someone of breeding, but as far as assets or property that would be advantageous to a land-bound prince, you have nothing. No estate, no house, no jewels, no family name, no dowry—and no ability to speak.”

Meira ducked her head, and squeezed her hands together. Galahad tilted his own head, watching her features.

“All spells and curses have Rules. From my experience, this type of spell most likely has a Love Rule, meaning that the prince cannot simply marry you. He has to love you.” Galahad regarded her. “Which is why we can’t risk telling him the truth about who you are, because if he marries you out of pity, it may violate the Rule and could kill you.”

Her brow furrowed hard, but she still didn’t look up at him. Galahad lifted his head.

“I’m certain my masters will have some suggestions when they write back to me,” he said. “In the meantime, I am going to introduce you at court, and to the prince, as an apprentice Curse-Breaker who has come to help me. I will arrange meetings and invitations for you. You will do everything I say, and do your best to endear yourself to the prince. Do you understand?”

She cautiously glanced up at him, and nodded.

“Good. And one more thing.” He turned and picked up a bag from the floor, reached his hand in—

And a vial sprang into his grasp. He pulled it out, and set the bag on a chair. He held the vial up so the sunlight glittered through the ruby-red liquid inside.

“This is a Teanga Potion,” he said stepping toward her again. “It will enable you to understand Edeltung, so you can at least comprehend what the prince is trying to say to you.” He popped the cork, and held it out to her. “One swallow will do.”

She stared at it, then at him. But he didn’t move. She squeezed her hands together to tightly her knuckles turned white.

“If you haven’t realized it yet,” Galahad said quietly. “There is no one else here that can help you.”

For another moment, she didn’t move. Then, at last, she lifted her hand and took it from him. Wincing, she studied the mouth of the bottle, then brought it to her mouth and took a single swallow.

She quickly pulled it away, and made a face, and pushed the bottle back at him. Galahad took it, replaced the cork, and put the bottle back in his bag. When he turned back to her, he found her covering her mouth with her hand.

"Well," he said in Edeltung. "What do you think?"

Her head whipped around, and her eyes went wide.

She swallowed again, hard, and her hand drifted down from her mouth.

"Clear enough?" he asked, picking up his gloves from his chair. Stunned, she nodded. He put on his gloves.

"We won't waste any time, then," he said. "The prince invited me any time I like to have breakfast with him. So we'll accept that offer. Come."

Thondorfax's hooves thundered upon the dry road and the wind gusted through his mane, Meira's skirts, and Galahad's cape. Meira sat in front of Galahad, side-saddle, leaning back against his chest. He bound his left arm around her slender waist and held the reins loosely with his gloved right hand. She gripped strands of Thondorfax's mane with both hands, white-knuckled, her whole body stiff.

High, billowing white clouds rolled through a bright blue sky as the two of them rode over the spreading green hills, dashing past herds of sheep and market carts pulled by mules. The sun flashed across the expanse of the sea, warming the winds and filling the breeze with the sweet scent of spring grasses.

Up ahead waited a stretch of stone wall climbing with vines, and their road led to its gate, and into the ancient wood beyond. Meira, her head right next to Galahad's, looked quickly back and forth, up and down the length of this wall, and at the towering trees. The next moment, they had passed through the gate and into the shade. Galahad leaned back slightly, and Thondorfax snorted and slowed his pace. The high winds tossed the branches of the beeches, and birds burst from their hiding places at the horse's rough entrance. Meira jerked, instinctively pressing back against Galahad.

"It's nothing to be afraid of," he said as Thondorfax settled into a smooth canter. But her body remained locked and hard against his.

They flashed down the forest track, the sun dappling the road ahead. Squirrels scuttled away, starlings screeched and squawked, and sparrows twittered in the distance. Meira's panicked breathing beat against Galahad's ribs, and soon she just lowered her head and squeezed her eyes shut. Galahad adjusted his hold on her and said nothing.

Soon, though, they approached the edge of the wood, and emerged into the sunlight, and the tiered palace garden. Galahad slowed Thondorfax to a careful walk.

"Princess," Galahad prompted. "You'll want to see this."

Meira forced her head up, and Galahad sensed her open her eyes…

And gaze up the splendid cascade of floral color in the gardens, the dazzle of sunlight in the spilling fountains, and far ahead, the shining white mountain peak that was the domed towers and decorated battlements of Perlkastel.

She let out a deep, awed sigh. Galahad didn't comment, just guided Thondorfax up the side path toward the main gate of the palace. Hooves then clattered on stone, and the iron gate loomed over them.

Two different guards marched out from their gatehouses and inclined their heads.

"Curse-Breaker Galahad Stormcrane, I presume?" said one with a beard.

"Yes," Galahad answered. "I've come to accept the prince's invitation for breakfast."

"Of course, sir," said the guard, and immediately the two men turned and opened the gate, without saying a word about Meira or Thondorfax. Galahad nudged Thondorfax forward, and the horse gingerly trod through the gate and onto the polished floor of the entryway. Then, he halted, and Galahad scooted back, and slipped directly off the back of the horse. He landed lightly, then came round and held out his hands to Meira.

She stared down at him, her eyes so pale they were almost colorless, and her face white.

"Come. You must have more courage," Galahad reminded her, beckoning with his fingers.

Her jaw tensed, her hands clenching on Thondorfax's mane.

Then, she slowly unwound her fingers from that tangle, and stretched out her left hand toward him. He caught it, then guided it up to his shoulder.

“Lean to me,” he instructed, stepping closer and tapping her waist. She did, and he took hold of her hips as she slipped free, and then lifted her down off the saddle and onto the ground. Immediately, he let go of her and stepped back. She shakily smoothed her hair and skirt, her breathing still jerky and tight, her eyes downcast.

Then, the double doors in front of them creaked and opened—

“Galahad!”

Galahad turned, and Meira’s head came up.

Prince James strode toward down the corridor to them, wearing a cream-colored doublet and trousers adorned with red and gold, and pearl hose with gold shoes. He spread his arms out wide, and beamed a ready smile, his eyes bright as the morning.

Meira gasped.

“Your Highness,” Galahad said. “I hope I’m not intruding, but I came to breakfast with you,” Galahad said.

“Not at all, not at all!” the prince cried. “As I said, you’re welcome any time.” Prince James stuck out his hand and Galahad shook it. Then, almost instantly, the prince turned from him to look at Meira. And he smiled.

“And who have you brought with you?”

Meira blushed, a lovely rose color blooming across her cheeks, apparently unable to keep her eyes off him. She smiled in return.

Galahad imperceptibly drew back, clasping his hands behind him.

“This is Meira, an apprentice Curse-Breaker from Maith,” Galahad said. “She’s come to learn all about the kingdom of Mhuirlan.”

“Indeed?” The prince’s smile grew to a pleased grin. “And how do you find it so far? Is this not the most splendid palace you have ever seen?” He gestured up and behind him. “We’ve always been= quite proud of it. The outer walls are covered with crushed mother-of-pearl, and the roofs of the domes are lapis lazuli all the way from Gormland!”

Meira’s mouth opened, but soon stammered closed, without making a sound.

“What?” the prince laughed. “Do I astonish you with my vanity?”

“She’s mute,” Galahad said quietly, watching her. “A recent accident involving a curse and a witch.”

The prince’s smile fell away.

“Good lord, really?” he said, glancing at Galahad. Meira ducked her head, and squeezed her hands together.

Suddenly, the prince reached out, took up Meira’s hand in both of his, and kissed the back of it. And when he looked up into her face, he kept hold of her hand.

Galahad watched them.

“Forgive me, madam,” the prince said firmly. “For being an idiot who speaks before he thinks.”

Meira quickly shook her head, still blushing prettily, and let out a soft laugh. The prince beamed at her, and finally released her.

“Won’t you join us for breakfast, also?”

She nodded, just as quickly. The prince straightened, and held out his right arm to her.

She suddenly flashed a questioning look back to Galahad—

He made a motion that she should take hold of the prince’s arm from beneath.

Biting her lip, she reached out and did so, and the prince secured her hold on him, and started through the doors, Galahad and Thondorfax following behind.

“This is my favorite place to dine,” the prince declared as he pushed open a glass-paned door and led Meira out onto a broad, sun-soaked, curved balcony. The sea spread out before them like a silver plain, shimmering in the morning. Stone planters filled with red flowers lined the balcony railing, and Galahad noticed bees bumbling amidst the blossoms. A table beneath a white cotton umbrella had been set for one, but even as they approached, three white-clad servants busily began setting two more places.

Galahad glanced back. Thondorfax lingered in the shade of the large audience chamber, his shoulder leaning against the doorframe as he looked out at the water.

The prince led Meira around the table and drew out the iron-wrought chair that sat before the already-laid setting. Meira stared at the chair, then looked at the prince, and froze.

“He’s pulling out the chair for you to sit,” Galahad stated.

Meira nodded, then gingerly maneuvered between the table and the chair, and sat down—though her eyes went wide when the prince scooted the chair in.

“The Curse-Breakers at Maith aren’t used to gentry manners,” Galahad said, pulling back his own chair, but waiting until the prince had seated himself before following suit.

“And you’ve never traveled away from home?” the prince asked Meira. The edge of her mouth twitched, and she shook her head—again unable to pull her eyes from him. But, as Galahad watched, the prince gazed back at her, a half smile on his own mouth. Galahad refrained from speaking, and sat back in his chair, listening to the distant cry of the gulls.

“And…” The prince cleared his throat, sat up a little, and addressed Galahad. “How far is the fortress of Maith from here?”

“Have you been to the Eisenzahn Mountains?” Galahad asked.

“Eisenzahn?” the prince frowned. “Oh, the Ironteeth? Yes, I have—though of course we had to travel around the southern border of Spegel to reach them, as we didn’t dare enter there *or* into Iss.”

“Yes, that is the longer route,” Galahad said. “But if you were able to pass directly through Spegel, you would cross it in two days, then come to a mountain pass that enters the narrowest point of Eorna Valley. The mountains just beyond them are the Drachenrucken—Dragonspine—mountains. And Maith is among them.”

“So, roughly two-hundred fifty miles,” the prince guessed. “*If* one could pass through Spegel.”

Just then, servants emerged carrying trays, and set down plates of blackberries, strawberries, biscuits, toast, and sausages in front of Galahad and the prince. Another servant set down glasses of pale juice, and then white pots of tea and cups, accompanied by honey and cream. Meira stared down at her plate and lost all her color. Galahad bit the inside of his cheek.

“Are you familiar with Spegel, Miss Meira?” the prince asked her. Her head came up and she raised her eyebrows at him, then shook her head.

“It’s a legendary kingdom,” he said, spreading butter on a piece of toast. “I’ve only ever heard stories about it, because the borders have been sealed since before I was born. But they work the most incredible magic there.” He leaned toward her. “They make glass that cannot break. And the entire *palace* is made of such glass.”

Meira’s eyes went wide.

“It’s true,” the prince assured her. “My father saw it himself. Tall as a mountain, all different colors. Indestructible. But…” The prince sighed, and took a bite of toast. “Perhaps thirty years ago, an emissary from our kingdom tried to visit the king of Spegel, and never returned. A second party went in search of them, and *they* didn’t return either. Finally, my father sent a legion of soldiers, and not even *one* of them came home. So, we stopped venturing that direction. And so, I assume, has everyone else.”

“They have,” Galahad said, taking off his gloves and laying them on the table. “And we may have discovered the reason.”

The prince’s head came around.

“What reason is that?”

“We believe that Queen Iskyla of Iss has taken up residence in the Palace of Glas,” Galahad replied. “I think she’s trying to overtake the kingdom. We’ve sent someone to investigate.”

“My word,” the prince muttered. “What would an ice fairy want with Spegel?”

“I don’t know,” Galahad said. “But I don’t trust her. Iss is the only place suited to her kind. Anywhere else she goes, she risks killing everything in her path.”

“But you’ve sent someone,” the prince pressed. “A Curse-Breaker.”

Galahad’s jaw tightened, but he nodded and buttered his own toast.

“We have.”

“Good,” the prince decided. “Maybe now at least we’ll have *some* idea as to what’s been…” He stopped, and frowned over at Meira. “Miss Meira, is the food not to your liking?”

Meira drew in a sudden breath and tried to smile at him, but it turned into a wince. Then, she put out a shaking hand and picked up a blackberry and carefully put it into her mouth and chewed. Galahad watched her, unmoving. Thankfully, she kept her lips closed. Then, she picked up another berry, and ate it also.

“Here, let me pour your tea for you,” the prince offered, picking up the small teapot. Meira instantly tried to move her teacup closer to him—

But somehow overestimated its weight—for she lifted the saucer too quickly and sent the cup tumbling onto the table—

To *smash* on the ground.

She dropped the saucer and slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Gog’s bread!” the prince yelped, quickly setting down the teapot.

Immediately, two servants darted out from the corners and dove to clean up the shards. Galahad folded his hands in his lap and ground his teeth.

Meira shoved the chair back and stood up, turning away, her face twisting—

"Wait, wait!" the prince cried, leaping to his feet and catching her wrist, almost stepping on one of the servants.

Meira pressed a hand over her mouth and wouldn't look at him.

"Do I…Do I really terrify you so much?" the prince asked earnestly. Her head came around, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Good lord, girl," the prince laughed, swiftly rubbing the back of her hand. "It's all right! Do you know I have more than ten thousand teacups? Now I ask you—what's a man supposed to do with *ten thousand* teacups?"

Meira suddenly gave a watery giggle, swiping at her face. The prince immediately reached into his pocket and tugged out a handkerchief and held it up for her.

She glanced at Galahad.

Trying not to grind his teeth again, Galahad reached up and tapped his cheek with his forefinger.

Unsteadily, Meira took the handkerchief from the prince and pressed it to her cheeks, drying her tears.

"Come, sit back down," the prince urged. "We'll have a fresh cup for you right away." He tugged on her hand. She relented, and sank back into her chair.

"I can't have you crying," the prince said frankly, sitting down and replacing his napkin on his lap. "Your eyes are far too pretty."

Meira laughed weakly again, but Galahad saw her repeat her blush. In a matter of moments, the servants had cleared away the broken shards, brought a new cup, and poured steaming tea for her.

Galahad slowly sat forward, poured his own tea, then picked up his cup and took a single sip—feeling Meira watching everything he did. Then, Meira risked picking up her own cup—with extreme caution, this time—and lifted it to her lips. She took a little sip, and seemed to like what she tasted, for she drank more before gently setting it back down on its saucer.

"There," the prince declared, pleased. "Nothing at all to be afraid of, is there?"

Meira managed a smile, and Galahad only slightly lifted his eyebrows, but said nothing as he began to eat his own breakfast.

Chapter Six

Galahad,

This is grave indeed. Though I cannot say I am surprised. I have seen love work the most spectacular changes upon the most immovable people imaginable. I would suppose that it has been a lonely life for this little mermaid, guarding this seal whilst her family lives much further out to sea—and the surf near Mhuirlan is rough and savage and cold. And of course, there are the fishermen to contend with—their nets and snares always threatening to snatch her up. I pity her more than I am angry with her. And for the reasons I have stated, I also ask you to treat her with compassion. Her existence so far has been much darkness and solitude.

I certainly have some ideas as to how you might help her win the heart of the prince. You must teach her etiquette and bearing and manners, as you mentioned—but you must also endeavor to make her as <u>beautiful</u> as humanly possible. Adorn her and dress her in eye-catching colors and garments, and if she has beautiful hair, put spells on it so it shines. Trust your own masculine instincts concerning her appearance. Make certain she smells lovely, also. Give her lotions and potions to make her skin glow, and her lips pink. Give her comfortable shoes so that she may dance and walk with ease wherever she goes. Encourage her to smile whenever possible. Also, she must look the prince in the eye whenever she can catch his attention. I have experienced and observed myself that two young people who gaze long at each other begin to feel their hearts beat faster, and as they see into each other, they begin to feel as if they are glimpsing each other's secret hearts.

Try to create times for Princess Meira and the prince to be "alone" together, though do not leave them entirely alone. Encourage the prince to share things he enjoys with her, and to teach her things about his home and his life. A man enjoys simply being near a woman who takes easy pleasure in his company, who values what he says, and who listens to and understands him. Men also are drawn to intelligent women who do not necessarily <u>require</u> their help, but <u>appreciate</u> it when it is given. Men take great joy in being needed. (Please don't assume I am patronizing you by

making this list of observations—I make it so you may refer to it, and it comes from my personal knowledge that you have never courted, nor do you wish to, nor have you pursued the study of courtship in any form except natural and casual observations of your own.)

Of course—and I do despise saying this, but it must be said—none of this will work at all if this girl is stupid, or ugly, or if she is selfish or cruel, or truly unlikeable. If you believe she is, in fact, a wretched person, then I advise you to abandon this task immediately and return to Maith so that we all may devise a different course of action.

But, if what you have seen so far tells you that she has a kind heart and a willing spirit, and she possesses enough beauty, then do all you can to save her life, and rescue the seal from the reach of the Sea Witch. I have sent you enough money to buy her a sumptuous wardrobe. Do take the advice of the maid in your household concerning the price and style of clothing—I have made inquiries about her, and learned that she grew up in the palace.

Write to me if ever you have questions about any of it. This is a delicate matter, Galahad—as almost all matters of the heart are. Tread with caution.
~Reola

Galahad folded the letter, and lifted his head. The afternoon had clouded, the sky lowered with grey clouds, and the wind turned moist and chilly as it rolled across the hills. He stood beneath a gnarled tree up on the hill behind the house. Scraw nipped at Galahad's hair and shifted his claws upon the shoulder of his cloak. Galahad leaned sideways against the trunk of the tree, listening to the ragged leaves batter in the wind, watching the smoke from the house chimney sweep away.

"*Scrap*," Scraw muttered, his voice deep and croaky. "*Scrap, scrap, scrap.*"

Galahad eyed him sideways.

"What, you want an egg?"

"*Hello*," the raven muttered back. "*Scrap*."

"Mm," Galahad folded the letter one more time and stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "Come on, then."

“Little Emblyn?” Galahad called quietly. He gazed down into the library hearth, watching the flicker of the flames and the fly of the sparks. Quick footsteps tapped across the wooden floor of the parlor, and stopped at the threshold of the library.

“Sir?” the maid asked.

“Where is Princess Meira?” Galahad asked, picking up the fire poker and shoving a log back onto the blaze. The dry logs crackled and popped in response.

“She’s upstairs in her room, sir. Sleeping,” Little Emblyn replied. “She liked to have fainted when she came home from the palace. Twas a terrible strain on her, sir.”

Galahad’s brow furrowed, and he turned to look at her. The maid held her apron in both hands, but she gazed openly back at him.

“A terrible strain,” he repeated.

“Yes, sir,” she nodded. “She seems…Well, she seems disorientated by everything. Sounds, smells, light through the window…” She lifted one shoulder. “Even furniture, and what to do with it.” She paused, watching him earnestly. “She cannot dress herself, sir. She can hardly eat unless I feed her like a babe.” Little Emblyn hesitated. “I believe riding on the horse terrified her, sir.”

Galahad replaced the fire poker in its stand and faced Little Emblyn, clasping his hands behind him.

“You do,” he said.

She nodded.

“If she…If she is a mermaid, as you said, sir,” Little Emblyn said quietly. “She cannot have ever learned what chairs or spoons or dresses or windows or horses or trees truly are. Even the wind might scare her, sir. It would scare me, if I’d never known it.”

Galahad glanced at the floor, and nodded once.

“Do you know why I took her to visit the prince today?”

“No, sir,” she admitted.

“If Prince James does not fall in love with and marry Princess Meira, she will die,” he said, meeting Little Emblyn’s gaze. “The spell that the Sea Witch put on Meira to make her human carries that condition.”

“She’ll *die*, sir?” Little Emblyn gasped. Galahad nodded again. Little Emblyn wrung her apron.

“What are we to do?”

“We must help the prince to fall in love with her,” Galahad answered. “My masters have made some suggestions for clothing and ornamentation for her.” Galahad stopped a moment, studying the maid. “What would you suggest?”

Little Emblyn blinked.

“Me, sir?”

Galahad almost smiled.

“Yes, you.”

“I should…I should think that before she worries about ornamentation, she needs to know how to eat, sir,” she answered, turning red. “And get dressed. And wash herself, and take care of her own hair.”

Galahad listened to her, then nodded.

“Can I rely on your help with that?”

“Of course, sir,” Little Emblyn said quickly. “Whatever you need.”

Galahad did smile now—just a little.

“Thank you.” And he turned back to the fire. Little Emblyn lingered there for a moment, then quietly moved back to the kitchen, leaving Galahad alone with his thoughts.

Galahad flung out the red tablecloth over the long dining room table and straightened it, then set the wooden candlesticks in the center, retrieved the basket of bread, and then lit the tall beeswax candles and the hanging lamps, which filled the room with a warm glow. He re-entered the kitchen, where he’d been all late afternoon, just as the kettle let out a piercing whistle. He snatched it off the range, and poured the steaming water into the black polished teapot. He carried the teapot out to the table, then brought out the teacups, and then the wine glasses, and the bottle of wine he’d found

in the cellar. When he went back into the kitchen, he fished out three wooden bowls from the cupboard, moved to the pot on the range, and ladled out generous helpings of potato soup and carried the bowls out to the table. He made another trip to fetch spoons and napkins, and a corkscrew. With a bright *pop*, he opened the wine and poured it into the glasses, then set the bottle aside and stepped into the entryway, stopping in front of the staircase.

The stairs creaked with two sets of careful footsteps, and then Meira appeared, beside Little Emblyn.

"Just hold my arm, Miss," Little Emblyn said in a soothing voice. "I'll not let you fall."

Galahad waited, watching as the edges of their skirts appeared, and gradually the two women worked their way down the wooden staircase, and stopped on the very last step.

Meira wore a plain maroon dress, with her dark hair brushed and braided back again. But she stared down at the rug, and wouldn't lift her head.

Galahad took a breath, and grasped his hands behind his back.

"Princess," he began. "I would ask you not to be afraid. Not of staircases or horses, or wind or forests, or teacups or chairs. Or Little Emblyn." He paused. "Or me."

She lifted her head, and looked at him. She still kept her arm wound tight around Little Emblyn's. Galahad took another breath, holding her gaze.

"We want to protect you. And we want to teach you how to live in this world."

Meira swallowed hard. Little Emblyn smiled up at her, and rubbed her upper arm.

"We've decided that the best way to begin," Galahad said. "Is to teach you how to eat, drink, dress and bathe on your own. Little Emblyn will help you with much of that." He gestured to her. "For my part, I will play the role of the prince, or any other nobleman, using all the same manners, in order to teach you how they expect you to respond. Is that…" he lifted his eyebrows. "…agreeable to you?"

For a long moment, she studied him. Then, she glanced down at Little Emblyn, who only kept smiling at her. So, Meira lifted her chin, and—in a flicker of royal bearing—inclined her head.

"Very well," Galahad said. "We can begin now." He shifted his stance. "A gentleman always escorts a lady into dinner. He begins by offering his arm to her." Galahad turned sideways to her, and held out his bent arm.

"Go to him, Miss," Little Emblyn said. "Put your hand under his arm, and take his elbow."

Meira slowly released Little Emblyn, then stepped down the last step and approached Galahad. She slipped her hand up under his arm, and laid her fingers on top of his forearm.

"Then, we walk into the dining room together," Galahad said, and drew her through the door. Little Emblyn followed.

"Now," Galahad released Meira, bent and pulled out the nearest bench. "Stand by the table, here."

Meira maneuvered around the end of the bench and stood in front of one bowl of soup. Galahad carefully pushed the bench up just behind her legs.

"Now, if it is a nobleman who did this for you, and not the prince, you would wait until the prince sits down before you do." Galahad straightened up. "But, let's assume I am the prince. So you may sit."

Meira cautiously sat down on the bench. Galahad then pulled out a bench seat for Little Emblyn at the end of the table.

"Oh! Thankee, kind sir," she giggled, and came to her place, and sat down. Galahad then rounded the table and seated himself across from Meira.

"When we eat together, Little Emblyn will be a noblewoman, too," Galahad said, adjusting his own bench. "Try to do everything she does."

Little Emblyn beamed and bounced in her seat.

"First, we ought to put our napkins in our laps," Emblyn spoke up. "So we don't spill on our *priceless* gowns."

Galahad blinked at her in surprise. But Meira suddenly smiled, and Little Emblyn grinned back at her. Together, the two women picked up their napkins, and Meira watched as Little Emblyn unfolded hers and spread it in her lap. Meira did the same thing, casting a glance at Galahad as she did. Galahad followed suit with his napkin.

"This is potato soup," he said, pointing to the bowl. "A potato is a root that grows in the ground. I carved it up and cooked it in salt and herbs and

broth, along with another root, called a carrot—that's what the orange bits are."

"It is hot," Little Emblyn warned. "Food that's just come from the stove can burn your mouth."

Meira gave Galahad a startled look.

"This is what you do," Galahad said. "This is a spoon." He picked his up. "We pick up some soup in the spoon like this. Then, we lift it up and blow on it."

"*Gently*," Little Emblyn added. She scooped up some soup too, and blew on it. Meira stared at both of them for a long time, then picked up her own spoon—trying to hold it as they did—and scooped up a little soup. She brought it to her lips, and blew on it a little.

"Then, if you think it may be cool enough to put in your mouth, you do," Galahad said, and put the spoon in his mouth.

"Mm!" Little Emblyn exclaimed, licked her lips, then looked at him with wide eyes. "You made this, sir?"

"You're surprised," he remarked.

"I…Erm, well, you're…you're a man, sir."

Meira snorted—and Galahad looked up at her to see her giving an amused but bewildered expression to both of them over her suspended spoon.

"Men cannot…always…cook well," Little Emblyn said, shooting sideways looks at Galahad.

"No one else accompanies me on the road," Galahad said, taking another spoonful. "If I didn't know how to cook for myself, I'd be eating hard tack, or starving."

"Yes, sir," Little Emblyn murmured, taking another spoonful of soup.

Meira opened her mouth, and put the spoon in, and carefully closed her lips around it, and then drew it out. She chewed the potato, and then swallowed. Then she froze.

"Good," Galahad said, realizing she was waiting. "Now, keep doing that until the bowl is empty, or you feel full."

"Shall I pour the tea?" Little Emblyn asked.

"Yes," Galahad said. So Little Emblyn stood up, and poured the tea into each cup.

"A noblewoman who is hosting you will do this for you, or her servant will," Galahad said to Meira. "Never pour your own tea when you are a

guest.”

Meira nodded—and watched, fascinated, as the brown, sparkling liquid tumbled into the cups.

“It is the same with the tea,” Little Emblyn said. “If you see it steaming, it is hot. You ought to be careful.”

Meira nodded again, frowning down at the tea.

“Remember what I said about teacups,” Galahad murmured. Her grey eyes met his, and she halfway smiled.

“We have drinks with our meals to help us swallow,” Galahad took up his wine and sipped it. “If your throat feels thick with food, take a drink.”

Meira’s frown deepened as she bypassed the teacup, and picked up her own wine.

“Be careful with that, too,” Little Emblyn said, with a cheeky little smile. “Too much of it and it’ll muddle your head, and you might fall over.”

Meira stopped with the glass halfway to her mouth, and gaped at Little Emblyn.

“The idea is to *keep* her from being afraid of food,” Galahad muttered, with a glare at Little Emblyn. Then, he shook his head at Meira. “Look. I am drinking it and I haven’t collapsed. Just take small swallows and you’ll be fine.”

Meira hesitated a long moment. But Galahad kept eating his soup, and so did Little Emblyn, so Meira risked a sip of the wine.

Immediately, she grimaced and put the glass down, then gulped and coughed.

Little Emblyn giggled.

“I told you to be careful!”

Meira reached for her teacup then, and took a drink from it.

“Her eyes are watering,” Little Emblyn noted, still trying to stifle a smile. Meira gave a choked laugh and wiped at her eyes, then looked down at her hand.

“Those are tears,” Galahad said quietly. “They come to your eyes when you taste something strong, or sour, or when you cough or sneeze.”

Meira gazed at him, her nose wrinkled and her eyes still shining, visibly confused.

“Or when something makes you sad,” Little Emblyn added quietly. “Or… unspeakably happy.”

Meira turned to consider Little Emblyn, and when she did, Galahad saw some of the confusion fade from her features. Galahad shifted in his seat.

“Come, let’s finish the soup,” he said. “It’s getting cold.”

Chapter Seven

“Put one foot behind the other, Miss. And then lift your skirts and bend your knees a bit—careful not to lean forward.” Little Emblyn followed the motions she herself described, watching Meira beside her. Meira studied Little Emblyn…

Then effortlessly curtseyed, even more gracefully than Little Emblyn, her green skirts swirling around her.

Galahad stared at her for a moment, then buried his surprise, drew himself up and nodded.

“Good. Now, hold out your hand to the gentleman.”

Meira straightened, and held out her slender hand to him. He took it, then bent at the waist and brought her hand halfway to his mouth, his eyes down, and then straightened and released her. Then, he turned sideways to her, and proffered his arm, which she smoothly took, and together the three of them entered the dining room.

They followed the same routine as the night before—Galahad pulled out the benches for both women, Little Emblyn poured the tea, and both Little Emblyn and Galahad explained the proper way to eat fried eggs, toast, and porridge. Meira drank from the teacup with more confidence this time, and as Galahad watched, she gained a little more dexterity with the fork and spoon. And whenever Little Emblyn laughed, Meira chuckled also, as if the mingled sounds pleased her.

Then, the creaky front door opened, and heavy footsteps rang through the entryway. Little Emblyn instantly stood up and hurried to see—

An old man with a short, grizzled beard and weathered face, wearing beaten brown clothes and a flat cap, came in and smiled. Well-worn grin lines deepened, and his blue eyes sparkled like a boy’s.

“Hullo, Ben!” Little Emblyn greeted him brightly. “Ben, this is Galahad Stormcrane, the Curse-Breaker staying at the behest of the prince.”

Galahad stood up, put his napkin on the table, and rounded the benches to hold out his hand to the old man.

“This is Ben Glennon, the groundskeeper here,” Little Emblyn said.

“I know who this one is,” Ben grinned, shaking Galahad’s hand—and Galahad could feel every knobby joint and scar left behind by a lifetime of hard work.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Galahad replied.

“Nay, but all me friends work down at the wharf, and they told me of a great, tall young man on a giant black beast, with a raven on his arm,” Ben laughed. “Everyone in Edel knows who that must be!”

“Mr. Glennon, this is Miss Meira, another Curse-Breaker from Maith,” Galahad gestured to her. Ben did a double-take, then instantly pulled off his hat.

“My pleasure, ma’am, tis an honor,” he said, and made a stiff bow. Meira smiled beautifully back at him, easily stood up, stepped closer and held out her hand to him.

“Oh! Thankee,” Ben said, grasping her fingers and hurriedly kissing them. Meira blinked, glanced at Galahad in question—

But Galahad looked away, and addressed Ben again.

“Have you had breakfast, Mr. Glennon?”

“Oh, thankee sir, but yes, I have,” Ben beamed, gripping his hat in both hands. “Me wife feeds me quite a lot in the mornings. But I’ve come to look after the back shrubberies, and to bring you this, sir. The prince’s herald gave it to me when he saw I was heading this way.” Ben reached in his coat pocket and pulled out a beautifully-ornamented folded piece of paper, sealed with the royal coat of arms.

“Thank you,” Galahad took it, broke the red seal, and unfolded the paper.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir, I’ll get to work now,” Ben bowed at the waist again.

“Thank you, Mr. Glennon,” Galahad said absently, still reading as the old man turned and left the house, and Little Emblyn shut the door behind him.

“Are you…needing my assistance, sir?” Little Emblyn asked Galahad cautiously.

“Little Emblyn, make yourself ready,” Galahad said, briskly folding the letter and putting it in his pocket. “You’re coming with us into town.”

Both women’s heads came around, and Meira lost some of her color.

“We’re going to have dresses made for the princess,” Galahad looked over at her. “She and I have been invited to a banquet at the palace three

days from now.”

“Will we be…taking the cart, sir?” Little Emblyn risked a look at Meira, who had gone paler.

“Thondorfax never pulls a cart,” Galahad replied flatly, crossing into the parlor. “We will walk.”

“Tom, he was a piper's son,
He learnt to play when he was young,
And all the tune that he could play
Was 'Over the Hills and Far Away'!”

Little Emblyn sang into the lusty wind as it blew her hair all around her head.

Together, Little Emblyn, Meira and Galahad hiked up the road across the hills, back toward Euryor house. Little Emblyn had a plain, strident voice, but it cut through the gust of the wind, and she cheerfully skipped on ahead of them, swinging her arms. Scraw floated far above them like a shadow against the sun.

Meira kept pace beside Galahad, gazing out over the rolling green hills, the heath, and beyond that at the sparkling channel, and the mainland of Mhuirlan. Their shoes scraped on the dirt road, and their flowing garments flapped in the wind. Galahad watched as Meira’s long hair roiled out behind her like a feathery banner, so different from the messy way Little Emblyn’s did. As if Meira’s hair refused to tangle, now that it had been persuaded that the wind was friendly.

“Over the hills and a great way off,
The wind shall blow my top-knot off!
Tom with his pipe made such a noise,
That he pleased both the girls and boys,
They all stopped to hear him play,
'Over the hills and far away'!” Little Emblyn sang brightly, bending to pick some white flowers from the side of the road.

“Do you approve of the dresses and fabric Little Emblyn chose for you?” Galahad asked.

Meira turned to him as if surprised by the sound of his voice. Then, she nodded.

“And the shoes? Are they comfortable?” he wondered.

She stopped, and so did Galahad. Meira took hold of her skirts and lifted them to reveal the new plain leather shoes with black cotton laces. She went up on her toes twice, then smiled at him.

“Good,” he said, starting to walk again. She kept up with him.

“The dresses should be ready in time for the banquet,” Galahad said. “I’ll ride in to town to fetch them when they are. Which do you think you ought to wear?”

She let out a short laugh, and then shrugged helplessly.

“Which do you like?” he clarified.

She tipped her head to the side, then kicked a stone ahead of her.

“The red one!” Little Emblyn called back. “The prince will see you and faint dead away!”

“Emblyn,” Galahad warned.

“Sorry, sir,” Little Emblyn blushed, twisting her flower stems together.

Galahad glanced over at Meira.

“The red one?”

Meira suppressed a smile, ducked her head, then drew in a deep breath and looked out over the ocean again, where the whitecaps rolled, and the fishermen’s boats tumbled over the waves.

“Tom with his pipe did play with such skill,” Little Emblyn sang again.

“That those who heard could not keep still;
As soon as he played they began to dance,
Even the pigs on their hind legs would prance!

Over the hills and a great way off
The wind shall blow my topknot off!”

Meira listened, and Galahad studied her profile, and for just a moment, as Little Emblyn’s girlish tones washed over them, he thought he glimpsed a deep sorrow pass over Meira’s face.

The fire muttered and glowed in the library hearth. Galahad sat on the couch, facing the flames, his left elbow on the armrest. The same large book

lay spread open in his lap, lit by the lamp on the table to his left. The wind had picked up as night fell, wuthering round the old walls of Euryor House, and whistling down the chimney. Galahad had drawn the curtains and lit the lamps, but the corners and heights of the library still stood in deep darkness. Scraw perched on the edge of the mantelpiece on one foot, his head tucked low, one eye open. Occasionally, he would utter low chuffing sounds to himself, and fluff his breast feathers. Galahad let out a low sigh, resting his left ankle on his right knee, and turning the page.

Soft footsteps near the doorway.

He looked up to see Meira silhouetted on the threshold. When she saw him, she stopped. He could make out some of her features in the dimness: her vivid grey eyes, and the shimmer in her hair.

Galahad held her gaze for a moment, then tilted his head to the right briefly, before returning his attention to his book. She didn't move for several minutes, then ventured in. The boards creaked beneath her careful tread, and she gave his couch a wide berth. She moved around behind the nearby armchair, then paused, captivated by the painting of the ship which was lit by two lamps. Inadvertently, Galahad's attention was drawn there, too. In the eerie flickering of the light, the huge waves seemed to stir, and the black clouds appeared to roll around the torn, desolate hulk.

Meira stood there in front of the painting for several minutes, and in the silence, Galahad finally turned back to his book. At last, he sensed her drift away, into the corner near one of the lit sconces, reach out and run her fingers across the spines of the books. Without moving his head, he lifted his eyes, and watched her. Her graceful fingers traced the gold-inlaid titles and colorful bindings, and she drew in deep breaths, as if tasting the scent of the old pages. In this way, she slowly made her way around the room, touching every single book, but making no move to take one down. When she passed behind him, Galahad tried to read, but instead was lulled by the quiet rhythm of her steps, the rustle of her fingers against the books, and the crackle of the fire.

Then, like a ghost, she slipped out of the library, and was gone.

Galahad's head came up and he searched for her shadow—but she had already gone up the stairs. For a moment, he studied the empty doorway, then at last turned back to the open pages before him.

Galahad glanced at himself in the full-length mirror in his room, adjusting his cuff. He wore black riding trousers and polished black boots, a military-style black jacket with ornate brocade clasps down the front. Over that, he'd donned an ankle-length velvet riding coat with a high collar and embroidery across the cuffs and lapels. He'd cleaned his sword, and wore it from his silver-buckled belt.

He straightened his collar, then strode out of his room, his hand on the butt of his sword. His heels tapped more loudly on the wood than his other boots, so he didn't hear the rattle of the carriage outside until he'd finished descending the steps.

"It's here!" Little Emblyn gasped, her hair in disarray as she flew past him to the door and heaved it open. Galahad peered through.

A royal carriage, sent by the prince, waited outside. It gleamed black, with gold trim, and four flawless white horses champed at the bits and stamped their feet. Laced and flounced and feathered footmen hopped down from the back of the carriage.

"We'll just be a moment," Galahad called through to them. They both inclined their heads.

A stair squeaked.

Galahad turned and looked back up the steps.

Meira stood on the landing, her hair done up in an elegant roll bound by a gold headband. Gold earrings twinkled by her cheeks, and she wore a scarlet dress with bell sleeves, a sweetheart neckline, and shimmering skirts embroidered with gold lilies. Little Emblyn had heightened Meira's features with a touch of makeup, which made her lips look just as red as her dress, and her eyes bright as the sky.

"Thank you for getting her ready, Little Emblyn," Galahad said, glancing at the little maid. Little Emblyn couldn't do anything more than breathlessly curtsey, then she turned and grinned up at Meira.

“Don’t you just feel like the little cinder girl who went to the ball and married the prince?”

Meira laughed, then shrugged.

“I’ll tell you the story later,” Little Emblyn said, hurrying to the foot of the stairs. “Come on! The coach is waiting for you!”

Meira hesitated, then started forward—and glided down the stairs, without any help. Galahad watched her until she drew up beside him—then, he held out his arm to her. She smiled up at him, and took it. And he led her over the threshold and out into the warm evening air.

The footmen immediately opened the door and pulled down the steps for her. Meira bent and gathered her skirt, and Galahad guided her up into the coach. She sat down on the scarlet padded bench, and Galahad backed away.

Meira’s eyes flashed and she started to get up again.

“I’m riding,” Galahad told her. “I’ll meet you at the palace.”

Meira’s brow furrowed, but she nodded and sat back. The footman replaced the steps and shut the door, and Galahad strode across the yard and into the barn where he found Thondorfax, all saddled and bridled—for Galahad had gotten him ready before he dressed. He led the horse out into the yard as the footmen mounted and the driver urged the horses to pull the coach round. Galahad put on his gloves, then mounted and settled himself in the saddle. And as the coach started out onto the road, blending in with the purple twilight, Galahad followed them at an easy clip toward Perlkastel.

Chapter Eight

As the light faded from the sky and the summer stars appeared, Galahad and Thondorfax followed the bright lamps of the carriage across the hills toward the palace woods. The coach wheels rattled on the gravel road, and Thondorfax's easy gait beat a rhythm.

They passed into the shelter of the woods, and the shadows of the great trees flashed past them, seeming to move and shift like dryads. Curious yellow eyes peered out at the procession, and an owl hooted afar off. Quiet breezes rustled the tresses of the beeches, making music along with the roll of the carriage.

Then, they emerged from the woods, and headed straight up the garden lane to the palace.

The exterior of the palace glowed in the brilliance of dozens of huge bowl fires, and the windows shone from within like living gold. The designs of fishes and waves appeared to weave and swim in the swaying light, as if the walls of the palace itself were alive.

The carriage made its way up the lane, and was soon joined by four others, equally splendid. Galahad rode close to Meira's carriage, keeping an eye on the other horses and drivers. Soon, the carriages drew up in the yard before the main gate, and halted. Galahad dismounted, and allowed a stable boy to take Thondorfax this time. Then, he moved to Meira's carriage and waited for the footman to open the door and extend the steps before he moved close and held out his gloved hand.

Meira looked slightly pale—but she suddenly smiled and let out a short sigh when she saw him. She stretched out her hand and grasped his, a little too tightly, stood up, and climbed carefully down the steps. The smile fell from her face, and she fixated on the ground.

"Are you well?" Galahad asked, keeping hold of her hand.

Her jaw tightened, and she nodded, but then she closed her eyes.

"Come. Have courage," he urged quietly, looping her arm beneath his and then covering her hand with his. "I won't be far."

She looked up at him and swallowed.

“Come,” he said again, and drew her forward. They maneuvered around another coach, and came up beside it just as a good-looking young man with shoulder-length brown hair, a short beard, and laughing brown eyes hopped out of it, wearing fine green livery with a family crest on his chest, and a beautiful emerald cape. He turned and extended a hand, and a girl took his hand—she had the same brown hair and laughing eyes, and wore green also. As soon as she had climbed down, the young man caught sight of Galahad and Meira, and beamed at them.

“Good evening!” he said brightly. “I don’t believe I know either of you—I’m Sir Gawain, a knight in the prince’s household. And this is my sister, Lady Hollis.”

Galahad reluctantly took his hand from Meira’s, and held it out to Sir Gawain. Gawain shook it heartily, and then Lady Hollis extended her hand, and Galahad grasped it for a moment also.

“I am Galahad Stormcrane,” Galahad replied. “This is Meira, a fellow Curse-Breaker from Maith.”

“Curse-Breakers!” Lady Hollis exclaimed.

“We’d heard something of your coming from the prince,” Gawain remarked. “Is there trouble?”

“At the moment, we’re just enjoying the prince’s hospitality,” Galahad replied.

Gawain smiled, then caught sight of something past Galahad and Meira.

“Ah! Here comes another one,” he said, and beckoned. Another young man came round Meira—and his eyes lingered on her. He was strikingly-handsome, had the tanned skin of someone from the south, with curly black hair, warm brown eyes, and a quiet expression. He wore a red livery, with a different family crest.

“This is Sir Tristan,” Gawain introduced. “Tristan, this is Galahad Stormcrane and Lady Meira. Curse-Breakers from Maith.”

“I have heard of Stormcrane,” Tristan said, his smooth voice bearing a fluid and elegant accent that marked him to be from the south-west port towns. He nodded, and extended his hand. “The pleasure is mine.”

“Thank you,” Galahad shook his hand. “This is Meira.”

Sir Tristan turned to Meira, and gave her a very warm glance. She smiled in reply and held out her left hand. Sir Tristan took it, gently, and kissed it.

“Sir Gawain, are you not going inside?” came another voice—and another striking, dark-haired man rounded a carriage. He wore sky-blue, with a dark blue cape, was slightly older than the others, and had piercing blue eyes and Romanesque features.

“Yes, of course we are!” Gawain replied to him. “We were just making new acquaintances.”

“And who might that be?” Though he spoke perfect Edeltung, this man had a much stronger accent—a glottal yet flowery and delicate mother-tongue that placed him from the western side of the Drachenrucken mountains.

“This is Galahad Stormcrane and Lady Meira, Curse-Breakers from Maith,” Tristan said quietly, finally releasing Meira’s hand.

“Oh! Tis a marvelous honor,” the newcomer said, grasping Galahad’s hand and pressing his forehead to it. “I am Lancelot du Lac, and I am your servant.”

Galahad considered him closely.

“I have heard of you, Sir Lancelot,” he said. “You killed the Fire Hoarder in Dragan Fells.”

“The honor is mine, to be remembered by you,” Sir Lancelot answered solemnly, straightening up. “But nothing compares with your feats amongst the dwarves of Silbernreich and the dragons of Gormland.”

“Dragons? Truly?” Lady Hollis said, turning wide eyes on Galahad.

“Are any of you coming in?” The laughing call echoed through the inner yard, and they all turned to see Prince James striding toward them through the open double doors. He wore splendid dark blue trimmed and embroidered with silver, and he spread his hands out to the sides.

“Your Highness,” Lancelot bowed, as did Tristan and Gawain. Lady Hollis curtsied. And, when Galahad sense Meira bending a knee in her own graceful curtsey, Galahad inclined his head.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Prince James said, and immediately glanced back and forth between Lady Hollis and Meira. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you,” Gawain cleared his throat and straightened his collar. “I fussed over myself all afternoon.”

“Shut up,” Tristan smirked, jabbing him—and Prince James laughed out loud.

“Yes, I can certainly tell that you tried, Tristan,” he remarked. “Do come in, all of you!”

The prince led the way into the lavish dining hall. The floors were white and silver alternating square tiles, tall archways covered in silver florals marched up either side, and crystal chandeliers hung from a ceiling painted to look like the night sky. The chandeliers blazed, refracting their light in rainbows, and lamps ensconced upon the pillars twinkled brightly. A long table stood in the center of the room, lined with silver chairs. A white tablecloth covered the banquet table, and dark red roses had been spilled down its length, interrupted by silver candlesticks and place settings.

Twenty other courtiers milled about, lavishly dressed in vibrant summer colors and glittering with jewels. The women wore headdresses and sparkling veils, the men wore sweeping capes and bold ornamentation upon their chests. Galahad felt Meira squeeze his arm hard.

The prince led them into the room, around the perimeter, glancing back and grinning at Lady Hollis and Meira, as if to catch their reactions. Galahad looked down at Meira, to see her marveling up at the splendid ceiling—but she still looked pale. The prince strode to the head of the table, where a majestic chair waited, and stood behind it.

“Please, Galahad,” the prince said. “Sit at my left, and Lady Meira, sit at my right.”

Galahad nodded, and immediately let go of her to draw out her chair for her. She took a deep breath, then came round and stood in front of the table. He set the chair against the back of her knees—

She started to sit down.

Galahad caught her elbow, and leaned in close to her ear.

“Wait for the prince,” he whispered.

Her face turned scarlet. She nodded stiffly, and slowly straightened back up. The prince made no notice, for he was waving to the other men. Galahad stepped behind the prince and approached the chair at the left of the throne.

Seeing the prince take his place, the other courtiers drew close to the table and stood behind their chairs. Sir Tristan came up to Meira’s right, and gave her a careful smile, which she returned, just as cautiously. Sir Lancelot

took a place beside Galahad, and Lady Hollis stood beside him. Sir Gawain picked the chair beside Tristan, across from his sister.

Prince James raised his hand, and the court fell silent.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “I am honored and blessed by your presence, and I hope you have a delightful evening here amongst your friends and your family.” And he sat down. Then the ladies sat down in their chairs, and the men adjusted them. Meira, still blushing, sat down too, and Sir Tristan helped scoot her chair up a bit. Lancelot seamlessly helped Lady Hollis. Then, the rest of the men took their seats.

Meira stared at her empty plate. Galahad’s jaw tensed, but he didn’t say anything—just took off his gloves and laid them by his wine glass.

The next moment, doors opened in the side passages, and dozens of servants emerged, bearing covered platters and bottles of wine. In no time at all, steaming, heaping plates of sauce-drowned pork, beef, fish; sugared baked apples, roasted vegetables and crisp salads covered the table, and dark wines splashed into the Spegel glass flutes. Delicious scents flooded the room, as did the dull roar of pleased conversation.

“Sir Galahad,” Lady Hollis spoke up. “You mentioned dragons. Could you tell me, please, what Sir Lancelot meant?”

“Dragons?” Prince James said, as the servants served him his meat and vegetables, and another poured the wine.

“I’m afraid you’ve knighted me prematurely, Lady Hollis,” Galahad replied, sitting back so the servant could ladle his food.

“Surely not,” Lancelot scoffed. “You have not been knighted?”

“Curse-Breakers bear that title alone,” Galahad answered. “I suppose it’s the same as being a knight of all the realms.”

“Mm,” Lancelot nodded thoughtfully.

“But dragons, Galahad,” the prince prompted. “Do tell us.”

Galahad paused, realizing that the knights and the prince were all fixed on *him* instead of Meira…

He cleared his throat.

“Truly, it’s nothing.”

“Do not let him say so,” Lancelot cut in. “Minstrels will be singing songs of his victory for a thousand years.”

Gwain, Tristan and the Prince all watched him raptly. Galahad cleared his throat and shifted in his chair.

“It was several years ago,” he said, spreading his napkin on his lap. “I was sent to Deargland because they called for a Curse-Breaker to free their queen from her barrenness curse…but when I arrived, they told me they wanted me to *make* a curse to strike down the dragon king of Gormland.”

Meira lifted her eyes and found his, her brow immediately furrowing.

“You surely cannot *make* a curse,” Sir Tristan frowned at him.

“I could, and can,” Galahad corrected. “I have enough experience with them. But that would break every oath I’ve ever taken.”

“What did you do?” Lady Hollis asked.

“I was imprisoned, and they made plans to execute me.”

“I thought killing a Curse-Breaker was against every law in Edel,” Prince James remarked.

“It is,” Galahad answered him, looking at him sideways. “But have you ever attempted to persuade a blaze of fifty full-grown dragons?”

Prince James laughed.

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“So…what did you do?” Gawain prompted. Galahad took a breath.

“I managed to escape and cross the border into Gormland,” he answered. “I found the king of the Gormland dragons, who is much older and wiser than the king of Deargland. He didn’t know that the king of Deargland was planning to attack his kingdom. I helped him rally his children who were sleeping in the mountains and in the caves on the coast. And when Deargland struck, Gormland was fully prepared, and much stronger. We drove them back, and killed half their family.”

“You flew to battle with them, then?” Tristan asked. Galahad nodded.

“On a dragon?” Lady Hollis cried.

“Yes.”

“Is that where you got this fantastic scar?” Gawain grinned, pointing to his own face.

“Oh, yes, it is a completely lovely scar,” Lady Hollis gushed—and all the men chuckled. Galahad glanced across at Meira—who lowered her head and gave him the smallest of hidden smiles.

“No…” Galahad said, looking down. “This one on my face came from King Dvellin of Emoth in Silbernreich.”

“Those ruddy dwarves,” Gawain muttered, rolling up his right sleeve. “I was passing through the woods at the edge of Silbernreich three years

ago—didn’t know I’d passed into dwarvish territory—and a dwarf scoundrel challenged me and nearly hacked my arm off. See?”

Galahad straightened up so he could see properly—a deep, wide mark scarred Gawain’s wrist.

“Hm. You should have asked him to tea instead—I’m sure he would have been reasonable,” Galahad said flatly.

The prince nearly spat out his wine—and the other knights burst out laughing. The edge of Galahad’s mouth twitched up, and Meira’s hidden smile grew.

“Lady Meira, you are being quiet,” Lancelot said, leaning forward to catch her eye. “We do not mean to exclude you with all our talk of battles and dragons.”

She sat up straight, and quickly shook her head.

“I’m afraid she’s mute, lads,” Prince James answered, turning to look at Meira—and his expression softened. “A run-in with a witch, I believe.”

The mirth around the table died, and all the men and Lady Hollis regarded her with sudden attention. Galahad simply watched her.

“Oh, how dreadful,” Lady Hollis whispered. Meira immediately ducked her head.

“No, don’t hide your face!” the prince objected—and reached out to touch her chin. She lifted her head and looked right back at him, and he smiled gently at her.

“If you cannot talk with your voice, you may talk with your eyes,” he said, slowly lowering his hand. “And we shall all strive to listen as best we can, shan’t we?”

“*Oui*,” said Sir Lancelot, in his native tongue. “*Bien entendu*.”

“Si,” Sir Tristan nodded, in his own tongue also. “*Alegremente.*”

Meira inclined her head to them, then returned to gaze at the prince, who looked back at her for a long moment, then picked up his wine glass.

“A toast,” he declared. “To the dragons, dwarves and shipwrecks that make our lives an adventure.”

Galahad took up his wine glass, as did the others at that end of the table. Meira did the same, but as Galahad watched, she didn’t take her brilliant eyes from the prince.

Galahad watched Scraw soar high into the night sky, then transform into a white light and shoot across the stars like a comet. Slowly, he drew back into the library and shut the window, then drew the curtain. Footsteps sounded from behind him, and he turned.

Meira, wearing her nightdress and a red dressing gown, her hair all undone and hanging in lustrous waves down to her waist, stepped into the library. Galahad blinked, then frowned at her.

“You shouldn’t come in dressed like that,” he said.

She suddenly stopped, pulling her arms in tight, confusion flashing across her eyes. Galahad heaved a sigh, lowered his head, then shook it.

“What I mean is,” he amended. “You should not wear nightclothes in the presence of a man who isn’t your husband.”

Her gaze went distant, and she backed up. Galahad bit the inside of his cheek.

“Meira,” he called.

She halted, but stared at the rug. He took a deep breath.

“You did well tonight,” he said. “The knights and the prince were pleased with you.”

Her gaze flicked to his for just an instant, but she didn’t smile. And she stared at the floor again. Galahad cast his own gaze down.

“Have you ever seen a dragon?” He waited a beat, then lifted only his eyes.

Her gaze risked meeting his again, then she shook her head, once.

“They’re the fiercest creatures you’ve ever seen,” he said quietly. “Tall and forbidding, and terrible. But once you learn the way they speak, and the way they listen, you find they’re some of the most beautiful people in Edel.”

Meira studied him, gripping her fingers together. Galahad stood still for a moment, then reached into his breast pocket and drew out a flashing, tear-shaped dragon scale about two inches long. The sapphire tones within the scale swam like the sea and sky, and the edges sparkled like diamonds. Galahad stepped toward her, and held it out.

For a long while, she stared at it. Then, very gingerly, she reached up, and took it from him. She turned it over and over in her fingers, feeling the

edges, considering the way the scale captured some light, and flashed other light off its refracted surface.

“Keep it,” Galahad murmured.

Her head came up and her eyes flashed. She pointed to herself. He just looked at her, then backed up and moved to the fire again.

“Goodnight,” he said, taking up the fire poker to jab the logs in the hearth. She hesitated there on the threshold for a few minutes, then turned and left him.

Chapter Nine

Clank!

Galahad opened his eyes and frowned.

Giggling issued up the stairwell.

Little Emblyn.

Galahad groaned and rubbed his eyes, then rolled onto his side and groggily lit the lamp on his bedside table. Then, he slapped his hand down on his silver pocket watch and lifted it, squinting at the time. It was just before dawn.

He put the watch back down, his hand wandering across his bare chest under the blankets, tracing the vertical scar that trailed down his right shoulder, his pectoral muscle, and down to the edge of his ribs. Wincing slightly, he massaged the muscle around the scar, trying to banish the ache that had greeted him every morning for five years now.

Finally, he let out a grunt, threw the covers off and got out of bed. He lit the lamps on the mantel, then poured water from the pitcher into the basin and had a brisk wash, and then he shaved his face—careful, as always of that jagged scar. He brushed his hair also, then put on his riding trousers and boots, fitted black shirt and black, collared waistcoat. He also slung on his belt, from which hung a work-a-day dirk.

He then reached in his bag and pulled out a brown bottle and a wooden chalice, just as he did every single morning, no matter where he was. And he stood in the center of his room, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. He poured the shimmering water from the bottle—unfiltered, unadulterated water straight from the mouth of the Source—into the wooden chalice, and drank it. Warmth flooded through his whole body. He remained there for several more minutes, eyes closed, as it seeped all the way through him.

Then at last, he put the bottle and chalice back, blew out the lamps and left the room.

As he came down the stairs, he heard Little Emblyn giggling some more, and then chattering on about the chickens, and what she had named each of them, and their temperaments. Galahad quieted his steps and

ventured into the dining room, then leaned round to see through the kitchen door…

Meira stood with Little Emblyn, both of them wearing simple dresses and shoes, as well as aprons—and they had both tied head scarves over their hair. Galahad slowed to a stop, remaining out of sight, and just watched.

"Now, we spread butter in the bottom of the pan so the egg doesn't stick," Little Emblyn was explaining as she stirred a hunk of yellow butter across the pan with a fork, her other hand on the handle of a pan on top of the hot range. The pan sizzled as she did so, and Meira put her hands on her hips, frowning hard as she studied every move Little Emblyn made.

"Then, we take an egg and crack it like this," Little Emblyn set aside the fork, picked up a pearly egg, then gave it a crisp *rap* on the edge of the pan. Meira jumped. Little Emblyn cracked the egg open with one hand and let the contents spill onto the pan. Now, the sizzling sound grew much louder, and the scent of frying eggs filled the room.

"Now you try," Little Emblyn said, setting the shell aside, picking up another egg and holding it out to Meira.

Meira gazed at it for a moment, then took it from her. She held it in her hand a moment, as if weighing it…

Then gave it a sharp *crack* on the edge of the pan just as Little Emblyn had done—and split it open with one hand.

Galahad's eyebrows went up.

"Oh! Splendid!" Little Emblyn crowed. "I've never seen someone do it that well on a first try!"

Meira beamed—and then suddenly turned to look straight at Galahad.

Little Emblyn instantly followed her gaze.

"Sir!" she dipped a hasty curtsey. "Were you wanting your breakfast now?"

"No," he shook his head. "I'm going to look after Thondorfax. We can eat when I'm finished."

"Yes, sir," Little Emblyn nodded. Then, she bounced up on tiptoe. "Meira just cracked an egg with one hand!"

"I know," Galahad said, glancing at Meira. "I saw."

And without saying any more, Galahad turned and left the house. He pulled open the front door and stepped out into the blooming dawn. Cool, fresh air met him, and the scent of dew. The sky was a beautiful, deep pink,

which lightened to a stunning pale blue in the east, where the tip of the sun had lifted over the edge of the world. Birds twittered all around him, singing cheerfully, and fluttering around the corn meal that Little Emblyn had already thrown out for the chickens. Galahad stepped around these chickens, who clucked and keened to themselves, and made his way across the yard and into the barn.

Thondorfax whuffled as Galahad stepped into the sweet-smelling darkness, and crossed to the window. He heaved it open, letting the morning light in, and turned to give a hearty slap and rub to Thondorfax's muscular neck.

Galahad set to work mucking out the stall, hauling in new straw, filling the manger with fresh hay, one bucket with grain and another with water. Whilst Thondorfax munched on the grain, Galahad pulled down the brushes and gave his horse a thorough going over, combing out every tangle in his mane and tail, and dusting off all the dirt from the road the night before.

He had almost finished when he heard hoofbeats outside. He put down the brushes, dusted off his hands, and stepped out into the yard to see a rider in royal livery and a plumed hat ride up on a white horse.

"Good morning!" the servant called out. "I come with word from the prince."

Galahad strode up to him, and took the folded paper he handed down.

"I was told to wait for an answer," the young messenger added. Galahad broke the seal and opened the letter. Then, he nodded at him.

"Tell the prince that we will come to the palace at two o'clock."

"Thank you, sir," the messenger answered, then wheeled his horse around and rode back up the road. Galahad watched him go, then slapped the message against his palm, and re-entered the house.

Galahad mounted Thondorfax, then scooted back on the saddle and turned to hold out his gloved hand to Meira.

She stood on the front stoop with Little Emblyn, wearing a finer green dress and no headscarf, but she twisted her fingers together.

"There's naught to be afraid of, Miss," Little Emblyn assured her. "He's a gentle horse. And the master won't let you fall."

Meira swallowed, staring up at Galahad.

“We won’t go faster than a trot,” Galahad said. “We’ll take our time and arrive when we arrive. There’s no hurry.”

Meira stayed where she was for several moments, then ventured off the stoop and up to Thondorfax’s flank. The horse stood very still, his head low. Meira cast her glance up and down his powerful form, then looked up at Galahad. He just waited, his hand extended, his right foot pulled out of the stirrup.

Then, she stretched up her left hand and grasped his right, put her right foot in the stirrup and hopped—

Galahad pulled her easily up onto the saddle, where she sat right in front of him.

Thondorfax shifted his weight. Meira shakily adjusted the way she was sitting, which was side-saddle—and she bent forward, gripping the edge of the saddle with both hands.

“Lean back against him, Miss,” Little Emblyn called from the stoop. “You’ll feel steadier that way.”

Galahad glanced over at the servant, but said nothing. Meira watched Little Emblyn too, then slowly pushed back and sat up…

Then leaned her back against Galahad’s chest.

He nodded, reached around her and held onto her waist, and took up the reins in his right hand.

“We will be back for dinner, Little Emblyn,” he told her. “Don’t make a fuss—cold cuts and cheese and bread will be enough.”

“Thankee, sir,” she answered, and with that, Galahad nudged Thondorfax’s flanks, and the horse walked out of the yard and up the road.

Thondorfax walked them up onto the moors, where the wind tousled their hair and Galahad’s cape, and the full afternoon sky shone with sunlight and white clouds. Sparrows flitted through the heather and gorse, chirping as they went. Thondorfax swayed lazily beneath them, sometimes snorting, flicking his tail back and forth.

Meira felt like iron against him, every muscle in her body clenched stiff. But as the warm wind greeted them, and the sunshine beamed down across them, Galahad slowly felt her relax. Her hands unclamped from the saddle, and began twining through bits of Thondorfax’s mane. Occasionally, she

would lean her head back, and rest it against Galahad's shoulder. And when Galahad took deep breaths, he drew in the scent of something like jasmine…which he realized must come from her hair.

Halfway across the moors, Galahad straightened up. Meira lifted her head off his shoulder, and he sensed her frown.

"Do you mind if we go a little faster?" he asked.

Her fingers worked through the mane, but she finally shook her head. Galahad wrapped his arm tighter around her waist, and clicked to Thondorfax.

Thondorfax graduated into a smooth trot, and when Galahad clicked again, he transitioned easily into a rolling canter. Meira's frame tensed briefly, but as the wind picked up and whipped through their clothes and hair, and the land flew by beneath them, she eased back against him again.

They climbed the shallow hill to the gate in the wall, and entered the cool shade of the prince's woods. The songs of the birds rose to a fever pitch, and the sun turned the leaves hundreds of shades of emerald. Thondorfax slowed his speed and huffed as he negotiated the few twists and turns, and at last they arrived at the base of the palace gardens.

Butterflies and bees danced in legions across the scores of blooming flowers, and the sun caught in the fountains like rains of diamonds. Meira took a deep breath of the delicious air, and Galahad echoed it.

They rode up the lane, butterflies swirling around them as they went, and arrived at the gate. The guards threw up a familiar "Haloo!" and quickly opened the gate. Thondorfax trotted in, stopped, and Galahad dismounted off the back of the horse. He came around to Thondorfax's right side, and held his hands up to Meira.

Without hesitating, she reached down with both her hands, grasped his upper arms, and leaned over him. He lifted her off the horse and lightly set her down. She let go of him, gave him a brief smile, and inclined her head.

"You're welcome," he answered.

"Curse-Breakers," came a call from the side of the courtyard. They turned to see a curly-haired servant stride out, and bow to them.

"The prince and his other guests are in the side garden," the servant said. "Shall I take you to him?"

"If you would," Galahad said to him, and held out his arm to Meira. She took it, and together they followed the servant through a side door.

They entered an airy passage, half open by tall windows to the outside and filled with sunlight. Their feet tapped against the marble tiles, and both Galahad and Meira studied the elegant statues that lined the corridor. When they reached the end of it, they turned right and left the palace through an open gate, and stepped out onto a stone landing. Before them lay a maze garden of hip-high groomed hedges, with a great, sparkling fountain in the center, and rose beds all around the perimeter. The sound of ringing water filled the open space, as did the echo of laughter. Galahad soon found the source: three people at the far end. One was clearly the prince, his gold hair shining like a halo. He wore riding boots and black trousers, a loose white shirt and leather jerkin—and he was the one who was laughing. Before him stood a green-clad Sir Gawain, and his little sister, Lady Hollis, who wore a charming pink dress, and white flowers in her hair.

"Your Highness," the servant said loudly as he led Gawain and Meira down the steps. The prince turned and caught sight of them, and beamed. He hurried up the path toward them, Gawain and Hollis in tow, both of them smiling also.

"Hello, hello!" the prince said cheerfully. "How are you Galahad; Lady Meira?"

Meira returned his smile, and held out her left hand. The prince took it immediately, and kissed it—and then Sir Gawain greeted her in the same way.

"How pretty you look today!" Lady Hollis gasped to Meira. "Your hair so deliciously wavy like that—and your cheeks! What rouge do you use?"

Meira grinned and shook her head.

"Dear sister, I believe that her blush and her curls are due to the morning wind," Sir Gawain remarked, giving Meira a warm look. "The most natural of all beauties."

"Indeed," the prince agreed. Meira blushed even brighter, and bowed her head.

"Lady Meira," Hollis said eagerly, taking hold of Meira's hand and pulling her free from Galahad. "We're to have *such* a treat: my brother is going to show us about the palace—the gardens, the ballroom, and the libraries—and then we're to have tea on the back terrace!"

Meira immediately looked at the prince.

"Where will you be, Your Highness?" Galahad asked.

“I’m to come with you,” he replied. “I know your mission would be better served if you knew your way about the island—so I’ve a mind to show you myself.”

Galahad felt Meira’s eyes on him, and his brow furrowed.

“Your Highness, may I propose something?”

“Of course, what is it?” the prince asked, folding his arms.

“Sir Gawain is from this island, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I am,” Gawain answered.

“I should like it if he came with me instead,” Galahad said. The prince blinked, and frowned.

“May I ask why?”

“I have no desire to inconvenience you,” Galahad told him. “And I also know that Lady Meira would be honored by the presence of her host.” Galahad turned to Sir Gawain. “Unless you have an objection to accompanying me.”

“Not at all,” Gawain said readily, then looked to the prince. “If it’s all right with the prince.”

“I…Well, certainly,” the prince said, shrugging. “Certainly. I have no objection.”

“Very well, then,” Galahad took a step back. “I’m anxious to learn more about Metern as quickly as I can.”

“We’ll go now, then,” Gawain said, following him. “Enjoy yourself, Hollis!”

Galahad bowed to the prince, but caught Meira’s eye. She gave him a little smile, and he returned it with a little nod. Then, he and Sir Gawain left the garden, even as the prince and Lady Hollis led Meira off through toward the fountain.

Galahad and Sir Gawain spent the rest of the afternoon riding along Metern’s rugged coastline, following the narrow tracks across the tops of the cliffs, dipping down into the valleys that led to the beaches, and exploring the roads that connected the tall mines. Sir Gawain knew the island as well as he knew his own face, and proved more than willing to tell

Galahad the history of its people, the ratio of farmers to fishers to miners, and all about the wealth that came from Metern's copper and tin mines.

They descended one wide track and found themselves on a huge beach at low tide, where they gave their horses their heads, and raced along the sand, the wind thrashing through their hair, the waves roaring and foaming to their left. Finally, as the sun lowered in the sky, they ascended to the road again and headed back toward Perlkastel.

"So what do you make of my island?" Sir Gawain asked as their horses strolled side by side, each following a wagon rut.

"It's a beautiful place," Galahad said, gazing out over the hills. "And very windy."

"Ha. Yes, it is that," Sir Gawain admitted. "And what of your search for the guardian of the seal?"

Galahad glanced over at him, then out ahead.

"With what you've shown me today, I feel more prepared."

"Good," Sir Gawain grunted, sitting back in his saddle.

"What about Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristan?" Galahad asked. "How did they come here, from so far away?"

"Oh, Lancelot travels all over Edel," Sir Gawain replied. "As a knight errant, ever since his father was killed. Sir Tristan is his riding companion. Lancelot rescued him from a witch in the Black Western Wood. Lance met Prince James and I several years ago, in the Eisenzahn Mountains, and took a liking to us. He's stayed here for several months now, but I believe he means to travel south to Albain soon, to Camelot, and take Sir Tristan with him. I might tag along, if Prince James will let me."

"Why Camelot?" Galahad asked. Sir Gawain gave him a secretive grin.

"They say that there's a magical sword waiting to be pulled from a stone," he said in a low voice. "And whoever can do it will become king."

"And you each have ambitions to be king of that corrupt swampland?" Galahad looked at him sideways. Sir Gawain laughed.

"No, not me! And not the others, either. But we want to see what happens."

"Mm," Galahad mused.

They finished the ride in easy silence, listening to the clap of their horses' hooves, and the rustling of the winds through the hedges and grasses. Finally, they drew up to the side wall of Perlkastel's grounds, and

guards opened the gate for them. The road turned to paving, and the air swelled with the perfume of roses. The pearly moon appeared in the east, and the sunshine faded from the purple sky.

They approached the castle and Sir Gawain dismounted, slapping his horse's shoulder and handing off the reins to the stable boy.

"Are you not coming in?" Sir Gawain asked, starting toward the door.

"No, our maid has dinner ready," Galahad said.

"I'll fetch Lady Meira for you, then," Sir Gawain said, and entered the palace. Galahad waited, looking up at the sky and spotting the first star of evening. A few minutes later, Meira emerged, on the arm of the prince. They were beaming at each other, and the prince was laughing. She carried a little book in her right hand.

"How was your ride, then?" the prince asked Galahad.

"Very good," Galahad replied. "Sir Gawain seems to know everything."

"Yes, he's a good son of Metern," the prince agreed. "I'm glad he could help you!"

Galahad inclined his head. The prince turned to Meira—but she clung to his arm, and gave him a sweetly-imploring look. The prince chuckled.

"Must you away so soon?" the prince asked Galahad. "You both are more than welcome to stay for dinner."

"Thank you," Galahad said. "But our maid has prepared for us."

"Ah—Don't want to upset Little Emblyn!" the prince exclaimed. Then, he pulled out of Meira's grasp, and took up her hand. "Good night, my lady. I hope you enjoy your book."

She bowed her head to him, lifted the book and held it against her heart. He grinned, kissed her hand, and then led her over to Thondorfax. Galahad adjusted his seat, pulled his foot from the stirrup, and held down his hand to her. She reached up, grasped his hand, and the prince gave her a leg-up into the saddle.

"Goodnight!" the prince backed up and waved. "You are welcome any time you wish."

"Thank you," Galahad said again, and steered Thondorfax out of the main gates, and down the garden lane. They passed the rose beds, and the spilling fountains, but just before they entered the woods, Galahad slowed the pace, and peered around her shoulder.

"What did he give you?"

Meira glanced toward him, bumping his nose with her forehead—he immediately moved his head. She brought the book down from her heart and held it up so he could see.

It was a small book, bound in red ornamented leather, with gold lettering. Galahad's brow furrowed, and quietness came over him.

"The Cinder Girl," he murmured. Meira nodded quickly, and her hair brushed his cheek. She opened the cover to reveal an illuminated drawing of a gorgeous castle, outlined in gold. She turned the page, and showed him the elegant, painstaking writing, and the illustrations of the poor, downtrodden girl sweeping the hearth in front of her wicked stepsisters and stepmother.

"He gave this to you?" Galahad asked.

Meira nodded again, and then laughed softly, as if her delight had simply bubbled over.

"Good," Galahad said quietly. "Hold tight to it."

She immediately shut it and clutched it against her chest again as Galahad urged Thondorfax into a trot and then a canter, and they made their way back down to Euryor House.

Chapter Ten

Galahad,

It sounds as though you both are making fine progress. She's a quick learner! You didn't tell me—does she have any loveliness about her at all? What does she look like? She sounds as if she has a charming manner, at least, if the prince and the knights were so taken with her. And yes, I have heard of Sir Gawain, Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristan—they are all gallant men, and have served various kingdoms well with their heroics. Sadly, none of them possess Curse-Breaking tendencies, or I would have you recruit them.

Rose is doing well enough so far in Spegel. Prince Nikolas is tolerating her presence, though he seems to be spiteful and cold. I will keep you apprised of the situation.

Keep your eye on the political situation in Mhuirlan. I've received word that King Leonardo's health is failing. Whilst he is alive, the prince may amuse himself as he pleases, and entertain whom he chooses. But if King Leonardo dies, Prince James will suddenly have to take on the mantle of the monarch of Mhuirlan, and his choices and responsibilities will change entirely. Keep me informed.

Reola

Galahad folded the letter and put it in his pocket, and shifted in his saddle. Scraw gripped Galahad's cloak shoulder in his talons and muttered to himself.

Galahad sat upon Thondorfax on the edge of a high, rocky cliff, overlooking the shining water of the vast channel, and the white shores and deep-green country of the mainland. The cool, powerful wind pulled at his cape and billowed it out behind him, and he took deep breaths of it, frowning against the brilliance of the morning sunlight.

Finally, he turned Thondorfax and they headed back down the cliffside track at a crisp pace which soon turned to a flying gallop. Scraw leaped off his shoulder with a croak, and soared on ahead of them.

Galahad rode northward, following the shoreline, Scraw's shadow flickering on the road before him. At last, he came to the road that led down to Euryor House, and clattered into the yard. He dismounted, scattering the chickens, and took Thondorfax into the stable to unsaddle and water him.

When that was done, he entered the house and took off his cape, listening for signs of the women.

He didn't have to listen long. As he hung up his cape, girlish singing rang out from the kitchen, accompanied by brisk scrubbing.

"Lavender's blue, dilly dilly, lavender's green
When you are king, dilly dilly, I shall be queen!
Who told you so, dilly dilly, who told you so?
Twas my own heart, dilly dilly, that told me so!"

Galahad stepped forward, recognizing Little Emblyn's voice in the kitchen, of course—but he suddenly stopped as swift scraping noises filled the parlor. He turned to see Meira, on her hands and knees on the rug, wearing a brown dress and soot-covered apron, her hair bound back and covered in a kerchief. She had moved the grate off the fireplace, and was now busily scooping the ashes into a bucket.

"Call up your men, dilly dilly, set them to work
Some to the plow, dilly dilly, some to the fork
Some to make hay, dilly dilly, some to cut corn
Whilst you and I, dilly dilly, keep ourselves warm…"

She had smeared soot on her nose and cheek, her hands were black, and as she worked, Meira swayed back and forth in contented rhythm to Little Emblyn's song. And for some reason, Galahad couldn't take his eyes from her.

Then, she scooped a rather large shovel-full into the bucket, and caught sight of him out of the corner of her eye. She sat back on her haunches, a little out of breath, and gave him a questioning look.

He cleared his throat, and tapped his face.

Her eyebrows went up, and she swiped the back of her hand across her cheek—making a wide black mark on her pale skin.

Galahad snorted, and smiled for an instant—but she saw it. And she laughed.

Little Emblyn stopped singing and scrubbing, and he heard her clamber to her feet. She came into the entryway carrying a sudsy brush, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows. She nodded to Galahad, then saw Meira and giggled.

“Well done, Miss. We’ll make a royal housewife of you yet!”

The two women laughed together, and Galahad could only look at Meira, who held up her filthy hands and then smeared them across her apron, her eyes shining all the brighter for the soot on her face.

Galahad spent the rest of the afternoon outside. He cleaned Thondorfax’s hooves and brushed him, he helped Ben Glennon, the groundskeeper, to cut back the hedges and tear the ivy off the back of the house, lest it intrude through the rear windows; he repaired a hole in the chicken coop, and secured a large piece of thatch that was coming loose of the barn roof. At twilight, he was still up on the roof, stripped bare down to the waist, when Little Emblyn stepped out onto the house stoop and called to him.

“Dinner, sir?”

“You and Meira eat,” Galahad answered, swiping sweat out of his face. “I’ll be in when I’m finished.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and re-entered the house.

As the evening darkened, he managed to tie off the last bit of thatch, and climb down the ladder. He snatched up his shirt off the grass and trudged around the back of the house to the pump. He pumped a deal of cold water into the trough, and then splashed it all over himself with both hands. He stopped and winced as the icy water stung his scar, but he bit it back and kept washing till his hair was soaked and his whole upper-body was wet. He grabbed his shirt and used it to dab himself dry, then entered the back door of the house. He passed through the empty kitchen, smelling the lingering scent of roasted beef and vegetables, then crossed into the empty dining room. He heard the women in the parlor, so he ducked into the staircase without their seeing, and headed up the stairs to change clothes.

Clean and dressed in looser black clothes, Galahad spooned the thick stew out of the pot on the range and into a bowl for himself, picked up a plate of meat and cheese, and took it out to the dining table where a large cup of water waited for him. He sat at his usual place, facing the door into the parlor.

Little Emblyn and Meira sat in chairs facing each other beside the fire. As the darkness fell, the fire warmed their features, making both of them look like a master's painting. Each had a lit lamp next to her elbow on a little table, and both worked with yarn—knitting. Little Emblyn was quite far along with what looked like a green sweater. Meira frowned hard at her own work: a simple scarf of maroon yarn. She only had about ten rows, and she moved the needles slowly, and very carefully, and often looked up at Little Emblyn for reassurance. Both young women had changed into clean—but plain—dresses, had taken off their headscarves, and washed their hands and faces.

As Galahad ate, Little Emblyn shifted and pulled a bookstand out in front of her, and Galahad frowned at the little volume clipped there.

"All right, then," Little Emblyn said. "*The Cinder Girl*."

Meira immediately smiled, and tucked her feet up on the chair beside her. Little Emblyn, not needing to look at her hands, kept working, even as she leaned toward the pages and the lamplight.

"'Once upon a time, in a land very far away, there lived a little girl whose lonely widowed father decided he ought to re-marry, to give his daughter a proper mother. His new wife was very beautiful, but she had two ugly, spiteful daughters—and when the girl's father died, her stepmother and stepsisters took to treating her like a slave rather than a member of the family. She was forced to work day in and day out, and to eat in the kitchen, and sleep next to the embers of the fire to keep warm. And so her sisters called her Cinderella."

Meira paused her work, her hands drifting down to her lap as she listened to Little Emblyn's reading. Absently, Galahad lowered his own hand, gazing into the parlor, as the story washed over him, and as the firelight softly touched Meira's face.

"'Though she worked very hard, and her stepsisters and stepmother were unkind to her, Cinderella was always kind and cheerful.'" Little Emblyn went on. *"'She sang while she worked, she always smiled, and as she grew into a woman, she seemed to become more beautiful every day.*

This made her stepmother and stepsisters extremely jealous, and they hated her.”

As Meira listened, she untied the end of her braid, and slowly began unraveling the plait, letting the thick, chestnut waves unwind around her fingers and tumble across her shoulders. Galahad watched the motion of her fingers as the fire crackled, and Little Emblyn turned a page…

Galahad stood up, picked up his plate, bowl and cup, rounded the table and climbed the stairs to finish his meal in his room.

Galahad threw his covers off himself and lit a lamp. The flame flared through the pitch darkness, illuminating his pocket watch, which read midnight. He got out of bed, pulled off his nightclothes, got dressed in his riding clothes and strapped on his sword. Then, silently, he opened the door and padded down the hallway, carrying his boots. He descended the stairs, avoiding the squeaky portions, threw on his cape and secured it, then put on his boots.

He left the house, shut and locked the door behind him, and put the key in his pocket. He then strode across the yard and into the barn, and saddled Thondorfax.

In no time, Galahad had mounted, and rode beneath cold, silvery moonlight up the road and onto the moors. Soon, Scraw caught up to him—he had been roosting on the chimney of the house. Thondorfax’s hooves thundered against the road as he stretched out into a full gallop. Galahad leaned low and rode every movement as if he were one with his horse.

He soon found the road that led down to the town of Megipesk, where he had first come ashore. He trotted down the hill, Scraw swooping low to his head, and passed the shuttered houses and dark square and silent fountain, hearing the roar of the sea rise up before him. Thondorfax’s hooves clattered on the cobbles, but he only pressed his pace. He rounded a corner and the town opened up to the sea—shining in the moonlight, foaming around black, toothy rocks. When Thondorfax’s feet hit sand, Galahad laid him out in a gallop again, Scraw crowing toward the stars.

The cliffs upon which Perlkastel sat soon loomed up on Galahad’s right, and the beach narrowed. Thondorfax splashed through the encroaching

waves, spraying water up on Galahad's legs, until at last Galahad pulled him to a halt and dismounted. His feet sank partway in the wet sand and foam, and he dropped the reins. He leaped up onto a high pile of jagged rocks covered in barnacles, and faced the channel. Wild wind swirled around him, and he set his jaw, staring into the black depths. Waves rolled and shattered just beneath him, striking his face with cold droplets that felt like snow.

Galahad took off his gloves and stuck them in his belt, narrowing his eyes at the deep stretch of forbidding sea before him. He pressed his bare hands together, and drew in a deep breath. He shut his eyes.

Instantly, a mighty heat built in his chest, and began throbbing with the force of a thunderstorm. It flooded his body, winding around his muscles, beating toward his fingertips. He sucked in another deep breath, and opened his eyes.

He thrashed his shoulders and flung out his right hand.

A great blast issued from his palm. His cape raged out behind him, an unearthly wind tore his hair.

Green fire screamed to life underneath the waves, illuminating the depths, sending light shooting across the ocean floor. It darted like an iron-straight river from the base of his rock directly out to sea, burning through the blackness, sending fish fleeing in every direction. And there, out in the center of the channel, it burst.

As if it hit a wall, it splintered and split into two directions. With blinding speed, each half screamed away from each other in a huge, gradual arc…

Until each half met each other again, and a vast circle glowed upon the bottom of the sea.

Galahad held out both hands now, and beckoned quickly with his fingers, taking deep breaths of the foreign scent that had risen from his spell…

The huge green circle flickered and flared, pulsing along with Galahad's heartbeat, steam rising from the surface of the restless waves. But the edges burned strong and bright, and no fissures cracked in the sides. And an overwhelming scent filled the air, rising on the foam and swirling on the wind.

Jasmine.

Galahad lowered his left hand and turned his right hand over, spreading his fingers…

A gentle heat touched his palm, and rested there. Slowly, he nodded.

He clapped. The sound rang over the waters. Then, as if he was hauling a rope, he grasped an invisible strand of magic and jerked it.

The green circle of flame broke, and the line of fire burst into sizzling smoke and disappeared. Darkness descended again, save for the wary glow of the moon. The sea growled around his feet. Galahad let out a long, cautious sigh.

The seal was holding. For now.

Chapter Eleven

The next day, Galahad arose before dawn, cleaned out Thondorfax's stall and then rode to the palace. He sought out the prince and ate breakfast with him on the terrace, the warm morning breeze toying lightly with their hair and the edges of the umbrella, and the sunlight sparkling across the sea.

Galahad studied the prince as they ate together. He seemed quieter, with shadows around his eyes. As if he had not slept well.

"So, how are you finding Euryor House?" the prince asked him, taking a sip of water and then cutting into his bacon.

"It suits," Galahad answered, finishing his porridge and sitting back. "I prefer a house like that, rather than a palace."

"Yes, I understand," the prince smiled at him. "I don't mind my own palace, as it's been my home since I was born. But some of the others I've visited, I've found so vast that I felt lost—and afraid to talk very loud."

Galahad nodded in agreement.

"How is Little Emblyn faring?" the prince wondered.

"She's excellent," Galahad said immediately. "And Ben Glennon knows his way around the house and grounds."

"Yes, he's a good old fellow," the prince remarked. "One of my very favorite men."

Then, the prince sat back in his chair, and regarded Galahad with a direct and serious thoughtfulness that instantly piqued Galahad's attention. He waited as the prince's brow furrowed.

"I'd like to show you something," the prince finally said. "And once I have, I'd like to hear your thoughts."

"All right," Galahad said, eyes narrowing. The prince stayed as he was for a moment, then nodded crisply, slapped his armrests and got up.

"We'll go get Gawain, Tristan and Lance. They can come with us." And without preamble, the prince left the terrace. Galahad arose and followed him.

They had soon summoned and gathered up the other knights, and in a short time, the three of them, along with Galahad and the prince, had

saddled up and mounted, and rode out across the moors.

After a while of casually riding, the prince took a deep breath and—almost as if he were making a conscious effort to lift his own spirits—he started singing loudly into the wind.

“Safe and sound at home again
Let the waters roar, Jack
Safe and sound at home again
Let the waters roar, Jack!”

He had a fine tenor voice—confident and beautiful. Without being spurred, Sir Gawain joined in and added a rousing harmony to the chorus.

“Long we've tossed on the rolling main
Now we're safe ashore, Jack
Don't forget your old shipmate
Fal dee ral dee ral dee rye eye doe!”

Soon, Sir Tristan smiled at the tune and joined in, adding another layer of harmony.

“Oftentimes have we laid out
toil nor danger fearing,
Tugging out the flapping sail
to the weather bearing!

Long we've tossed on the rolling main
Now we're safe ashore, Jack
Don't forget your old shipmate
Fal dee ral dee ral dee rye eye doe!”

Lancelot pulled up next to Galahad, and gave him a wry glance.

“I am sad I don’t know this song,” he remarked. “Do you know it, *mon ami?”*

Galahad shook his head.

“I don’t,” he answered. “But if I did, I’m afraid I don’t have anything of a singing voice.”

“But the best of friends must part
Fair or foul the weather
Hand yer flipper for a shake
Now a drink together!

Long we've tossed on the rolling main
Now we're safe ashore, Jack
Don't forget your old shipmate
Fal dee ral dee ral dee rye eye doe!”

In another half hour, they passed into a wood—much older and more tangled than the forest around the palace. This wood was wild, filled with gnarled oaks and chestnuts, their roots wrapped around each other, their branches knotted together to form a great, dark canopy. The prince slowed his horse, and the others followed suit. They soon ambled, single-file, onto the forest track, and passed into the shadow of the ancient wood.

The damp, rich must of foliage surrounded them, and the deep, quiet air closed in. Birds fluttered in the distance. The horses’ hooves shuffled through fallen leaves.

Suddenly, Galahad’s skin tingled—and he spurred his horse around Lancelot and Gawain’s to ride beside the prince.

“Are there elves in these woods?” he murmured, glancing around.

“Not for a very long time,” the prince replied, following Galahad’s gaze. Galahad looked at him.

“So there *were* elves?”

The prince nodded.

“Yes, in my great-great-great grandfather’s day—the man who became the fourth king of Mhuirlan,” he replied, tilting his head back and letting the dappled light fall across his face. “He wrote down stories of when he visited here as a child, and the elvish girls and boys would tease him, and giggle at him, from behind the trees. He only truly saw one once.”

“An elf child?” Galahad asked. The prince shook his head.

“No. An elfin man.” The prince’s eyes distanced. “He stepped out in front of the little prince, and just stood there. As if he’d been waiting for him.”

“What did he look like?” Galahad pressed.

“The story says that he wore clothes that looked like woven light, with the sun shining from his hair,” the prince said quietly. “He had eyes like blue starlight, and skin like pearl. He wore a silver sword, and my great-great-great-grandfather said he was a head taller than his own father the king. And his face struck him with terrible fear—yet he knew he wouldn’t hurt him.”

Galahad hardly breathed.

“What did the elf do?”

“He told the prince to pass a message on to the king,” the prince answered. “He said: ‘The light must rise in the mountains of the west.’” The prince sighed, and looked at Galahad. “After that, when the prince came to the woods…he didn’t hear any more laughing.”

“Nieryn,” Galahad whispered. “He saw Nieryn An Fhoinse.”

The prince smiled quietly.

“Perhaps,” he said. “That’s what I like to think, anyhow.”

Galahad stared at him, a stunning realization settling down through him. No wonder this prince was so luminous and alive.

“Look!” the prince cut into his thoughts, and pointed ahead. “There’s the first wall.”

Galahad tore his eyes away from the prince to find half of a shattered wall, all draped in ivy. The prince pulled his horse to a halt, and dismounted. The other knights did the same, so Galahad jumped off and came round Thondorfax, running his gaze down the length of the ancient wall.

“What is this?” Galahad asked.

“The Ruined Mount,” the prince replied. “The very first stronghold of my people.” He glanced back at the others. “Come,” he beckoned, and Galahad kept up with him, hearing the others trail after, making comments about the path and the trees.

They ducked through a hole in the wall, which had probably once been a low gate. They then clambered up a hill littered with huge, moss-covered stones, weaving between the tangled trees and stepping through carpets of ferns. At last, Galahad spied the walls of the fortress keep, and a little window. They came near, and rounded the gentle curve of the wall until they came to the tall gate, long bereft of its fortified oaken doors.

Galahad’s skin tingled again—but an icy chill accompanied it. He rested his hand on the butt of his sword, and pressed close to the prince’s side.

“Do you frequent this place?” Galahad asked him as they strode into the overgrown courtyard, where a tree had grown up through the well, and the inner walls had crumbled.

“We came not four weeks ago,” Sir Gawain spoke up. “Had a picnic just over there.” He pointed to the far corner, where sunlight broke through a gap in the trees.

“Why did I not come?” Lancelot wondered.

“You were fishing with me,” Tristan answered him. “On the trawler.”

“Ah, yes,” Lancelot nodded. “You were sunburnt.”

“No more than you,” Tristan countered.

“I should like to see the tower,” Lancelot pointed. “Are the stairs passable?”

“Yes, there’s a good view from the top,” the prince acknowledged. “It’s quite safe. You take Tristan and Gawain—I want to show something to Galahad.”

The knights nodded, and Lancelot immediately trotted toward the door of the corner tower, Gawain shouting something about the age of the battlements.

“What is it?” Galahad frowned at the prince. The prince just gave him a solemn look, and motioned to him. Then, he turned and led the way through an arched side door off to the left.

Galahad was forced to duck beneath the arch, though the prince didn’t have to, and Galahad found himself starting down an exterior set of moss-covered, curving steps. To the right, the wall of the fortress rose up into the trees. To the left, the wall only came up to their hips, standing open to the woods. The prince said nothing as they gradually descended, the tapping of their soles on the stone accompanying the distant birdsong.

Soon, another portion of the fortress rose up before them, as did a tall, dark doorway. The prince stopped on the threshold, faced Galahad, and regarded him with a quiet gravity.

“This wasn’t always called the Ruined Mount,” the prince said. “In the beginning, this place was called Arghans Ker.”

Galahad’s brow instantly furrowed. The prince saw his face, and nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “It means ‘silver.’”

“The Silver Fortress,” Galahad realized. “But I have always thought it was a myth!”

“No, quite real,” the prince assured him, setting his hands on his hips, wistfully gazing over the ruined walls. “My forebears discovered silver here—silver that would never tarnish. They built their fortress around their silver mine, and gilded the stones with that same silver. This castle was once one of the most marvelous sights in all of Edel—shining like the sun on the peak of the island.”

“What happened?” Galahad asked.

“The elves came,” the prince replied. “And my people made friends with them, and asked them to live here. The elves agreed, and made their homes among the young trees around Arghans Ker.” The prince smiled unexpectedly at Galahad. “But then, two unexpected things happened, quite by accident. The elves brought a magic with them that caused the trees to grow tall and deep, and to become so tangled that cart traffic to and from Arghans Ker became very difficult. But my people loved the elves, and didn’t want to quarrel with them. So they sought elsewhere for wealth, and discovered the copper and tin veins nearer to the ocean. They decided to move the royal family to a new palace near the coast, and begin mining the tin and copper. They continued to mine for silver here, also…until the day that a great root from one of the trees broke through a wall under the earth, and the entire silver mine flooded.”

“So Arghans Ker was abandoned,” Galahad concluded.

“Yes,” said the prince. “And the outer walls were stripped of their silver, which has now been used or sold, though a very small bit of it is still in the treasury at Perlkastel.”

“And then,” Galahad said. “The elves left.”

“They did,” the prince said, a flicker of sadness crossing his face. “But, even as I’ve grown up, I like to imagine them still walking in these woods. And sometimes, I can almost feel them.” He sighed. “Though I don’t often mention it—I know I sound mad.”

“No, you don’t,” Galahad countered. “Elves leave deep marks wherever they go. Their magic remains, even if they leave.”

The prince regarded him, his jaw tightening.

“I wondered,” he said quietly. “Which is why I wanted to bring you to see this.”

“What is it?” Galahad pressed.

The prince took a breath, turned, and passed into the shadow beyond the door. Galahad followed him.

For a few steps, Galahad could see nothing—he had to put out his left hand and search for the damp wall. Echoing footfalls sounded ahead of him, and then the prince passed into a beam of light that cut down through the ceiling. Galahad picked up his pace and caught up to him, and together they passed through another doorway, and into a large, circular room. And Galahad came to a sudden halt.

The ceiling, far overhead, was gone, and sunlight poured down through the round opening. A narrow stone walkway formed the circumference of the floor, where Galahad now stood beside the prince.

But the rest of the floor…

It plunged straight down in a vast hole, flooded to the brim with rippling water. The walls of the shaft shimmered with silver, almost like a swirling whirlpool of glimmering fish. But the depths of the hole swam with a dark, ethereal green.

And up from those depths…

Rose the mast of a ship.

The crow's nest half shattered, ropes drifting with haunting weightlessness. The shreds of a flag languidly flowing back and forth… back and forth...

Its tip did not breach the surface, but remained just beneath, as if beckoning a fatalistic soul to lean down and touch it…

And, as Galahad lifted his chin and gazed down into the deep, he could glimpse—and *feel*—the great, shadowy hulk of the wrecked ship lying down in that silent grave.

"What is this?" Galahad whispered—and his utterance slithered across the stones and the rippling water. He looked over at the prince…

Who was already gazing back at him, the strange reflections from the water moving across his features, illuminating his blue eyes.

"It is the *Cygnus*," the prince murmured. "My father's ship."

Chapter Twelve

An icy chill shot down through Galahad's blood. He stared back down at the sunken ship.

"How did it come here?" he breathed.

"I don't know," the prince confessed. "But a month ago, after I had recovered from my own shipwreck, I came here and sat at the edge of this pool. It was empty, then. And I threw in a coin, as I had often done as a boy." He drew in a shaking breath. "And when I came here yesterday…"

Galahad looked sharply at him.

"You used it as a wishing well?"

"The people of Metern always have," the prince answered.

Galahad turned toward the prince, watching every aspect of his face.

"Your Highness," he said quietly. "What did you wish for?"

"What I have always wished for, whether sleeping or waking, sincere or idle," the prince whispered, gazing down at the massive shadow of the dead ship. "To see my father again."

Galahad swallowed, the ice building in his blood. And the ship captured his attention again.

"What does this mean?" the prince wondered.

Galahad took a slow breath.

"You have heard of the Sea Witch," he said quietly, the echoes of his tones swimming through the chamber.

"Of course," the prince answered. "Every night, from my mother, before I went to bed."

"She has heard, and granted your wish," Galahad whispered. "But not in the way you imagined."

"What?" the prince gasped. And as Galahad stared back at him, his face went white, his eyes wide.

"Are you…Are you saying that my father is down there?" he choked. "*On* that ship?"

Galahad said nothing. The prince started looking around frantically.

"Wh—Well, we have to get divers!" he cried. "I must go down there, I must recover his body—"

"No," Galahad seized the prince by his upper arms, clamping down hard and shaking him. The prince's head came up.

“How dare you—” the prince yelped.

“No, you don’t understand,” Galahad cut him off. “Think of it, Your Highness. The silver of Arghans Ker has always been magic, and the woods above it were once lived in by elves. And now *seawater* has somehow broken into the mineshaft and brought you, *of all things*, the very ship that claimed your father’s life. The ship you wished for, but never *truly* wanted to see again.” Galahad shook him again, forcing the prince to look at him. “This can be nothing but a trap to lure you to your death.”

The prince shook his head hard, tears spilling down his cheeks. Galahad reached up and put his hand around the back of the prince’s neck, holding him firm.

“If it were goodly magic, it would have brought you a vision of your father at peace in the light of the Source,” Galahad said earnestly, leaning his head closer to the prince, pinning his gaze with his own. “Instead, it took your nightmares and brought them to life.”

A shattered sob escaped the prince’s chest, and more tears fell. Galahad gentled his hold on him, and slowly shook his head.

“You cannot want to see your father’s bones bound up in a net, or caught in broken wood,” he murmured. “Remember him as he was when you last saw him—and as you know him now to be: alive, and bright. And at peace.”

The prince’s head fell forward—his forehead bumped Galahad’s, and tears tumbled onto the front of the prince’s doublet. Galahad shifted, and rested his forehead on the crown of the prince’s head. The prince let out another helpless sob, and the strength left his shoulders.

“*Solas, solas, solas,*” Galahad whispered, closing his eyes, letting heat build in his chest, flow out his hands and into the prince’s neck and head and arm. He gripped the young man tighter, and kept whispering, even as the prince shivered and cried. “*Solas, solas, solas…*”

Finally, the prince forcibly gathered himself, straightened up and swiped at his face. Galahad did not release his arm.

“Come,” he said. “We need to leave.”

The prince just nodded, trying to hide his face from him, and let Galahad draw him out of the chamber, along the darkened stairway, and to the threshold of the arched door. Cool forest air met them, and the prince took deep breaths.

“Forgive me,” the prince sniffed, wiping his face with his sleeves.

“You lost your father,” Galahad said quietly. “You have the right to weep.”

The prince’s brow twisted, and he nodded again, keeping his eyes downcast.

“So, erm…” the prince said unsteadily. “You think it’s cursed.”

Galahad watched him a moment.

“I do not trust it,” he answered. “And until I understand its meaning, I do *not* want you or anyone else coming near this place.”

The prince’s head came up, but Galahad leveled a severe look at him.

“Do you understand?”

“I do,” the prince said. “I have no wish to die.”

Galahad weighed his answer, then nodded once. The prince sniffed again.

“In fact, I have half a mind to go back to Hanter-broder,” he confessed.

“Why Hanter-broder?” Galahad asked.

“I have friends there. I visit often,” the prince said. “Especially since my mother has been with my uncle at the Halls of Healing.”

“Perhaps you should ask these friends to come here instead,” Galahad suggested. “Rather than venture out on the water by yourself.”

The prince blinked, and absent tears fell, but his gaze cleared, and he almost smiled.

“That’s a thought!” he said. “Perhaps I will.”

Galahad nodded, and briefly touched the prince’s shoulder.

“Compose yourself,” he said. “We’ll find the others and go home.”

“Mm,” the prince grunted, wiping his tears again, and followed Galahad back up the winding stairs.

The sky darkened as Galahad rode home. Thondorfax snorted when Euryor House appeared through the twilight, its windows alight, its chimney smoking. Galahad let out an imperceptible sigh, and the tension in his shoulders eased.

He dismounted in the yard, led Thondorfax into the stall and took off his saddle and bridle, made certain he had enough water and feed, and then tiredly crossed back toward the front door.

As he closed the door behind him, he was already tugging off his cape, his footsteps sounding heavily on the floorboards. And just as he was hanging his cape on the peg, Meira darted into the entryway, a book in her hand, her eyes searching. She blinked when she saw him, and her eyebrows went up. He nodded to her.

"Is that the master?" Little Emblyn called from the dining room. Meira nodded to her in turn. Little Emblyn hurried into the entryway also, quickly tying on her apron.

"I'll get your supper, sir," she gasped, dipping a curtsey.

"No, I've dined already," he held up a hand. "With the prince and the knights."

"Oh," Little Emblyn glanced over at Meira, then dropped another curtsey. "Very good, sir."

"I'm going into the library," Galahad sighed, pulling off his gloves and raking his hand through his hair. He passed Meira, dropped his gloves onto a table in the sitting room and entered the darkened library. The lamps glowed, and the curtains had been drawn. Scraw, sitting on the edge of the mantel again, chuffed at him and fluffed out his feathers. Galahad neared him and stroked the bird's chest, and then tapped his long beak with his forefinger.

"Scrap," Scraw said. "Scrap, scrap."

"Go in the kitchen and get something, then," Galahad sighed once more. "Go on."

"Crack!" Scraw spat, then hopped off the mantel and onto the rug. And as Galahad watched, Scraw bounced nonchalantly across the floor to the door, as if he were a gazelle. Galahad rolled his eyes, then sat down heavily in the couch, draping his hand over his mouth and staring into the fire. But then, inevitably, his gaze was drawn upward, to the haunting painting of the battered *Cygnus*, and the stormy sea awash around her.

Movement to the left, and a familiar step. He glanced over to see Meira venture in, still carrying her book—the red book the prince had given her: *The Cinder Girl*.

She rounded the couch behind him, and then moved toward the mantel to regard the painting, as he'd just been doing. Galahad looked at her more closely now. She wore a long-sleeved, maroon dress that hung down to her ankles, with a dark blue sash. Her long hair had been braided, and she wore

a beaded cloth circlet. With graceful absence, she held the book up against her chest with her left hand as her gaze traced the image of the broken ship.

Then, she turned to him, and pointed up at the painting. He drew a deep breath.

“It’s the *Cygnus*,” he said. “The ship that went down with King Orion, Prince James’ father.”

Her eyes flashed, and her brow furrowed. Galahad took his hand down from his chin and interlaced his fingers in his lap.

“I saw it today,” he told her. “At the bottom of the silver mine at Arghans Ker.”

Meira’s gaze instantly intensified, and she stepped closer to him, holding the book against her with both hands. He looked gravely back up at her.

“Do you know how it may have gotten there?” he asked. She frowned hard, but didn’t break his gaze. Then, slowly, she nodded. Galahad went still.

“Was it Myrkur?”

Meira hesitated, then winced and put the book down on the chair. She took a quick breath, lifted her hands, thought a moment, then drew a circle in the air and pointed to the rune on her hand. She then held up both hands like a wall, and then took her right hand, pressed it against her heart, then punched it forward, opened her hand, grasped the air and twisted it.

Galahad rubbed his eyes, then dropped his hand.

“I knew it. She’s trying to reach the land,” he muttered. “She’s gone around the seal and is trying to flood the Ruined Mount and then the wood, to twist the elvish magic with Desire Spells that will kill anyone who comes in.” He raked his hand through his hair again and ground his teeth.

Then, he realized Meira was staring at him.

“What?”

She raised her eyebrows and gave a little laugh of disbelief. He bit the inside of his lip, then cast his gaze down. For a long while, he said nothing. But he felt Meira’s mirth drain away, replaced by an intense attention he’d never sensed before. And so he spoke into the waiting silence.

“When I was ten years old, my mother gave birth to a son,” he said, quietly. “She named him Gaius, because she and my father were so happy to finally have another child.” Galahad drew in a low, careful breath. “Four

years later, Gaius died of the putrid throat. And my mother…" Galahad swallowed. "My mother has never spoken since."

He glanced up at Meira. She just watched him, dark eyebrows drawn together,

eyes bright in the lamplight. Galahad looked down again.

"I learned how to read what she was thinking, just by looking at her," he told her softly. "And when I understood her, she would sometimes smile. But I've never heard her laugh." He gripped his hands together, and looked up at her again. "I suppose…I've learned to understand silence."

Meira didn't move. Galahad swallowed again and lowered his head, studying the shadows at the foot of the fireplace.

A whisper of movement. Her skirts brushed his leg. Then, her slender right hand reached down, and slipped into his.

Her touch was warm, firm, and soft. Reflexively, Galahad closed his fingers around hers, but didn't lift his head. Didn't look at her. For a moment, she gently held onto him…

Then withdrew, slid her hand free of his, turned and left the room, leaving her book behind.

Galahad sucked in a sudden, trembling breath, pressed his fingers to his eyes, then cleared his throat and stared into the fire, the crackle of the embers filling the emptiness of her wake.

Master,

Today, I accompanied the prince to the Silver Fortress, which I'm certain you must know about, though I confess I believed the place to be a myth . They call it the Ruined Mount, now. The prince wanted to show me something, and I could tell at breakfast that something had been troubling him. Now I understand his mood. The silver mine at the Ruined Mount has flooded—with seawater. And down inside that well is the wreck of the Cygnus. The ship that took down King Orion.

And the prince told me that not a month past, he had thrown a coin in that water and wished to see his father again.

I have no doubt that Myrkur is behind this twisted trick, and that it was an effort to lure the prince into diving into that well, and perhaps losing his life. Meria has confirmed that Myrkur may be trying to flood the mine and then the woods, to curse them. I have forced the prince to promise

not to go back there until I have learned more. If you can tell me anything more, please do.

As to your questions about Meira—she is as tall as you are, with long, thick, brown hair. She's very pale, and blushes easily. She has grey eyes, and a slender figure. And yes, ~~she is~~ I would say that she has a loveliness about her. Enough that any man would notice her.

If you hear anything from the Halls of Healing, let me know.

G. Stormcrane

Chapter Thirteen

Galahad closed his eyes, letting the cool sea wind wash over him—through his hair and loose shirt—as he sat on a tall rock on the beach near Euryor House. The beach where he had first found Meira.

Thondorfax shuffled past him, and he opened his eyes to watch the unsaddled, unbridled black horse trudge away from him through the wet sand, his pristine coat gleaming in the morning sun. The waves surged and foamed around the horse's hooves. The ocean inhaled as the water withdrew, to exhale in rolling rushes that crashed upon the beach. The blue sky was laced with thin clouds, which occasionally interrupted the downpour of sunlight.

Shrieks and girlish giggling suddenly joined the call of the gulls, and Galahad turned to his left to spot Little Emblyn and Meira, standing hip-deep in the surf, splashing water at each other. They were both completely soaked, their hair plastered to the sides of their faces. And whilst Little Emblyn would duck away and throw up her hands when water came flying her way, Meira always leaned into it—it struck her face and sparkled on her cheeks, and danced down her braid like ropes of diamond.

Up on the shore near them, Ben Glennon and his wife Bridget—a portly lady with a mess of curly red hair stuffed into a cap—sat casually in the shade of an outcropping on an old blanket, with a basket between them, drinking currant wine from small bottles and eating cold-cuts, breads, cheeses, berries and pies. They shouted cheers to the young women, and laughed at their antics. Galahad let out a low breath as he watched them all. He didn't remember the last time he'd been to a picnic.

"What do you think of our Sunday custom?"

Galahad's head came around to his right to see Prince James striding down the sandy path toward him, wearing riding boots, black trousers, a loose white shirt and brown vest—and as always, an honest smile. Galahad arose from his seat and inclined his head.

"The whole of Mhuirlan enjoys a day of rest once a week, by order of the king," the prince said, the wind tossing his golden hair.

“Is the picnic also mandatory?” Galahad asked wryly. The prince laughed out loud.

“It might as well be,” he chuckled. “You couldn’t stop it if you tried.”

“James!” came a shout across the beach. The prince suddenly looked past Galahad—and his face lit up.

“Bee!” he cried, then shot a glance at Galahad. “Pardon me—she was my nurse!” And with a quick slap to Galahad’s shoulder, the prince raced past him across the beach to meet the portly lady in the middle and throw his arms around her. Bridget crowed with laughter and hugged him right back. Galahad hesitated a moment, then followed in his footsteps.

“Hullo, dear boy, how are you, how are you?” Bridget cried, backing up and rapidly patting the prince’s chest with both hands.

“I’m fine, Bee, just fine,” he answered, beaming. “How are you, Ben?” And he stuck out his hand to Ben, who quickly whipped off his hat.

“Jes fine, Your Highness, thankee,” Ben said, taking the prince’s hand.

“We haven’t seen you in several weeks, have you been busy wi’ business?” Bridget demanded.

“Entertainin’ those knights, more than like,” Ben supposed. The prince laughed.

“Yes, some of that, and quite a bit of official business,” he said. “I’m grateful for a fine day like today when I can escape!”

And then he caught sight of Meira and Little Emblyn, who still stood in the surf. Little Emblyn was trying to bury a sneaky smile whilst stealing sideways glances at Meira—who stood captivated and breathless at the sight of the prince, one hand gripping her skirt. Her braid was coming loose, and graceful curls hung down around her face. The sunlight made the droplets of water on her face twinkle. Galahad stopped walking, and said nothing. The prince looked both women up and down, then let out a laugh.

“I’ve clearly missed all the fun!”

Little Emblyn burst into a giggle, and Meira beamed.

“No, you haven’t!” Bridget corrected. “Come eat with us!”

“I shall,” the prince decided. “Are there blankets for these ladies? We can’t have them catching cold.” And he started toward the picnic basket.

“Yes, let’s eat,” Little Emblyn decided, and together, being shoved by the waves, she and Meira trudged up on shore—

And suddenly, Meira went under.

Galahad was half in the water before he knew what he was doing. Waves slammed into his knees and he plowed through them, aiming to dive straight into the foam—

Movement to his left.

He instantly jerked backward, out of the way, as Prince James threw himself into the water, plunged his arms down and snatched Meira up out of the water. She broke through, gasping, her eyes wide, and clutched his arms. Water poured off her.

"Are you all right?" the prince cried, searching her face. She sputtered, but nodded, and then let out an embarrassed laugh.

Galahad set his teeth and closed his hands, then pushed off of the sliding sand and backed out of the waves. The prince guided Meira out of the water, his arm around her, and helped her over to the blanket, where Bridget threw another blanket around her shoulders.

Then, Little Emblyn, still sporting that secret grin, plopped down next to her and started giggling again. Meira's head came around, and Little Emblyn poked Meira in the side. Meira, ticklish, twitched away and laughed too.

Soon the others were teasing her about how graceful she'd just been, and Bridget began passing around the food. Galahad stayed where he was for several minutes, then turned and silently left the beach, Thondorfax trailing behind him in hopes of a sugar cube.

Galahad rode through the morning mist at a brisk trot, the heavy fog resting in his hair on his shoulders, beading up on his cape and sliding down the fabric. He couldn't see but two hundred yards in any direction, for the cloud lay upon the island like a shroud. Dew covered the thick grasses, and Thondorfax kicked up mud as they went. Galahad ignored the chill and damp as his narrowed eyes searched the border of the woods.

He had arisen before dawn and saddled Thondorfax, then ridden all the way to the woods that surrounded the Ruined Mount. He did not venture in—but for hours he circled the border of the forest, listening and testing the air, often coming to a complete halt, pulling off a glove and holding out his hand, feeling for the tendrils of magic that coursed in and out of the trees like invisible bands of lightning. Now, when he closed his eyes, he could feel a shadow lurking in the heart of the wood.

Inside the silver mine.

Clenching his teeth, he opened his eyes and stared into the darkness amongst the trees, Thondorfax's tail swishing back and forth, back and forth. Then, Galahad turned him, and headed back down toward Euryor House.

By the time he neared the cottage again, the sun had risen and dispelled much of the fog—and what remained lay like a golden haze in the gentle valleys and beside the hedges and walls. The fresh scent of dew filled every breath he took, and his horse's rhythmic trotting accompanied the frenzied singing of the birds in the gorse bushes. And then, as he approached the house, Little Emblyn's voice rang out from within the walled kitchen garden.

"My Bonnie lies over the ocean
My Bonnie lies over the sea
My Bonnie lies over the ocean
Oh, bring back my Bonnie to me!
Bring back, bring back,
Bring back my Bonnie to me, to me!
Bring back, bring back,
Oh, bring back my Bonnie to me!"

Galahad drew up next to the wall and peered over, for the wall came up to Thondorfax's shoulder. He drew the horse to a halt, and sought out the source of the singing.

There, in the center of the garden, Little Emblyn and Meira knelt in the dirt, pulling up carrots. They both wore servants' dresses, their hair bound back in kerchiefs. Dirt covered their hands and their aprons. The sunlight lit up and warmed their pretty faces and their stray curls—and as Galahad watched, Meira mouthed the words of the song along with Little Emblyn.

"Oh, blow ye winds over the ocean
Oh, blow ye winds over the sea
Oh, blow ye winds over the ocean

And bring back my Bonnie to me!”

Galahad didn’t move as he watched them. Little Emblyn worked with practiced ease and Meira followed what she was doing, digging up her own carrots more carefully, but no less correctly. And she swayed her comely head back and forth with the gentle waltz rhythm of the old song.

Then, inexplicably, Meira lifted her head and looked right at him. And she smiled.

He nodded to her.

Little Emblyn stopped singing and sat up.

“G’morning, sir!” she called, tossing a carrot in her basket. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“Yes, thank you, Little Emblyn,” he acknowledged, swinging one leg over the saddle and setting his foot on the wall. He then pushed off Thondorfax and stood nimbly atop the wall. As Little Emblyn got up, dusted off her hands and went back into the house, Galahad hopped easily down into the garden and landed by the cabbages. He pulled off his gloves and his cape and tossed them onto the wall, relieved to be rid of their weight.

Meira followed his movements for a moment, then started working again. Galahad hesitated, still standing in the shade of the wall. He glanced at the door, but it had shut behind Little Emblyn. Silence fell in her absence, save the songs of the birds, and the scrape of Meira’s tools. Galahad ducked his head, then stepped onto the path and moved closer to her. He stopped across the carrot bed from her, saying nothing. Again, she lifted her head, and her eyes captured the sunlight. And for the first time, Galahad saw a sparkle of bright blue around her pupils that he had never noticed before. She tilted her head as she gazed back at him. Then, the edge of Galahad’s mouth twitched.

“Princess,” he said, lifting one eyebrow.

She immediately sat up, spread her dirty hands out to the sides like a dancer, and regally dipped her head—then gave him a saucy look. Galahad smiled at her—and she grinned.

A sudden shadow flashed overhead.

Galahad’s head came up and his smile vanished. Scraw flapped his great, tattered wings and swooped down toward him. The bird landed in the

garden, next to Galahad, and Meira jumped. The great raven held a letter in his beak, and muttered to himself around the edges of it.

Galahad bent and took it from him.

“Scrap, scrap, scrap,” Scraw huffed, dancing absurdly around the carrot bed and making for the open kitchen window. With a blustery flutter, he hopped up onto the sill, and then dove straight through.

Little Emblyn screeched and a pan *bashed* to the floor.

Meira burst out laughing.

The sound caught Galahad like the sudden striking of sunshine in his eyes, shooting a thrill through the center of his chest. Meira fell sideways onto her elbow, unable to contain herself.

“Tisn’t funny!” Little Emblyn howled out the window. “Balmy… *stupid* bird!”

Meira collapsed onto her back, wracked with laughter, tears running down her temples.

And Galahad could only stand there, letting the wild, dancing sound wash over him.

“Shut it!” Little Emblyn complained again—but she suddenly couldn’t suppress her own chortling. “Tisn’t funny, Meira!”

Meira kept laughing, then wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands, and let out several shaky sighs. Then she endeavored to sit up, but her arms were still weak with delight, and threatened to give out again.

Galahad quickly rammed the letter into his pocket, took a large step over the carrot bed, and held his arms down to her. Swiping more tears out of her face, she reached up and grabbed his arms and tried to lift up—

She tugged too hard, and almost pulled him onto his head.

He yelped and stumbled forward, nearly falling. This sent Meira reeling with more laughter, and Galahad turned his head away and fought back a chuckle of his own.

“No, no—come on, don’t knock me down,” he scolded as she clawed at his shoulders. He finally got some leverage around her waist and hauled her upright, staggering backward as he did. She fell against him, still laughing, and found her feet. And for just an instant, he held her in his arms.

She brushed at her eyes again, still giggling, and easily pulled away from him—he released her. Then, she bent and picked up her basket, straightened and looked at him, her sky-bright eyes twinkling with tears.

She grinned, and gave him a graceful curtsey, then wove around him and headed toward the kitchen door. And Galahad could do nothing but watch her go.

Galahad sat in the library at the writing desk, his hand over his mouth, the letter from Reola held limply in his hand on his lap. He stared blankly at the bookcases in front of him, his jaw clenched.

Tap, tap, tap.

He didn't turn.

"Sir, luncheon is ready," Little Emblyn called.

Galahad didn't answer.

"Sir?" she said, uncertain.

Galahad let out a stiff sigh and dropped his hand, but didn't look at her.

"Emblyn, get Meira and bring her here."

"Yes, sir," she whispered, and hurried away. Galahad glanced down at the letter again and bit the inside of his cheek.

In a few minutes, two sets of footsteps entered the library, then slowed to a halt near the couch. Galahad slowly folded the letter.

"Prince James' uncle, King Leonardo, has died," Galahad said. "The laws of Mhuirlan dictate that a king's younger brother will take the throne after him if the king's first son is too young to ascend—and then, when the prince's uncle dies, the prince becomes king. Prince James is twenty-five years old, which is four years past the proper age." Galahad tossed the letter down on the desk, stood up and faced the two young women.

"So…" Little Emblyn gasped. "Prince James is the king!"

"He is," Galahad said flatly. "And as such, his responsibilities will now be to his kingdom first, and his own heart second."

Galahad watched Meira go pale. He looked directly at her.

"Had you known these laws, and that his uncle was so ill, you might not have made such a foolish decision to abandon your post." Without waiting for a reaction, he strode around them, and left the room. "We no longer have time to waste in the garden." And with that, he turned and charged up the stairs to his room.

Chapter Fourteen

Galahad didn’t speak as he rode with Meira up the lane, through the gardens of Perlkastel as the purple of evening began to touch the sky in the east. He had ordered Little Emblyn to dress Meira in a deep blue dress with pearl earrings and a pearl necklace, her hair hanging loose in long, extended curls, bound away from her face by a blue velvet headband.

Galahad turned Thondorfax, and they left the garden and avoided the main gate. Instead, they drew up in the riding lawn beside the palace, which was bordered by tall beech trees. At the far end stood a pillared folly…

And Galahad glimpsed the prince, sitting on a bench on the other side of it, facing the darkening sea.

Galahad slowed the horse, stopped and dismounted, then helped Meira down. She landed and didn’t look at him. Galahad turned away and quietly rounded the folly, a warm breeze greeting him from off the waters. The prince sat with his elbows on his knees, his gaze faraway.

Galahad halted and bowed at the waist.

“Your Majesty.”

The prince—the king—looked up and found him. And his cheeks shone with tears.

“Ah,” he gave a soft, watery laugh. “You’ve heard, then.”

Galahad righted himself, then glanced over at Meira.

“When we received word,” Galahad said. “And Lady Meira wanted to come sit with you.”

The prince’s brow furrowed, and he sat up. Meira stepped into his view…

But she didn’t curtsey, or incline her head.

Instead, she stepped up beside him, and sat down on his right. She pressed her side to his, lowered her head, and took hold of his hand in hers. She did nothing more.

And, as Galahad watched, the young king’s expression broke. He stared at her profile, marveling as if he’d never seen her before. Then he lowered

his own head and let silent tears fall.

Galahad backed away, then turned to Thondorfax and adjusted the saddle synch. The horse dropped his head and started grazing, and Galahad leaned against his shoulder, casting his gaze out over the stretch of the ocean, waiting for the first star to emerge…

But soon, his eyes were drawn to the couple on the bench. The king didn't say anything, and Meira didn't move, but the breeze stirred her elegant hair and the edges of her skirt. While Galahad watched, more than once, the new king looked over at her, as if to make certain she was still there. And whenever he did, she would return the look. As if they didn't need words.

Galahad made himself face the palace instead, and leaned back against his horse, folding his arms. Studying the intricate designs upon the palace walls, the gleam of the fading light on the lapis lazuli domes…

Then, the king began to speak.

Galahad couldn't hear what he was saying, but when he looked, the king and Meira had shifted to face each other, and the king held onto her hand with his right, but gestured with his left. Meira nodded, always fixed on his face, meeting his eyes. The king spoke in detail about something, sometimes smiling, sometimes battling back more tears. And as he talked, the sky darkened, and one by one, the stars came out.

Galahad ran his fingers through his hair, then finally approached the two of them again, and bowed.

"Your Majesty," he cut in. "It's going to be dark soon. We ought to let you rest."

"Yes, of course," the king agreed—his tears having dried, and his expression slightly brighter. "Thank you so much for coming." He smiled at Meira. "You can't imagine how much I needed company this evening."

Meira smiled gently back at him and squeezed his hand, which he still held. Then, she inclined her head to him, arose, and kissed the ring on his right hand.

The king laughed.

"Ha—I do believe you're the first person to have done that."

She curtseyed, and the king stood up, taking a bracing breath—as if he'd been underwater for too long. He rubbed his face and then pushed his hair out of his face and cleared his throat. He reached out his hand to Galahad, who took it.

“Thank you again,” he said. “Safe journey home.”

“Thank you,” Galahad replied, and held out his arm to Meira. Her attention lingered on the king for a moment longer, then she took Galahad’s arm, and let him lead her back toward the horse. As Galahad helped Meira up into the saddle, the king followed them.

“I mentioned this to Meira, but I’ll tell you in person rather than sending you an invitation,” the king said. “Tomorrow is my birthday. I’ve had a ball planned for six months. Everything is ordered and everyone is invited. It would be a terrible waste and inconvenience for my guests not to go ahead with it. I would like both of you to come.”

“We’d be honored,” Galahad told him, climbing up onto the horse and settling in the saddle. “Thank you for thinking of us.”

“Thank you for thinking of *me*,” the king replied earnestly. “You are true friends.”

Galahad nodded to him, then turned the horse, and rode with Meira back through the garden, and toward Euryor House.

“Emblyn, where is Meira?” Galahad braced his hands on the doorframe of the kitchen and leaned in. Little Emblyn, who stood at the range, turned around but kept stirring the stuff in the pot.

“Erm, I think she’s gone down to the beach, sir,” she answered.

“Mm,” Galahad grunted, thought for a moment, then tapped the doorframe. “I don’t suppose there’s a spinet in the house. I haven’t seen one.”

“There is one, sir,” she answered. “There’s a closet in the library—it can be rolled out.”

“I don’t imagine you can play it,” he wondered flatly.

“Tolerably, sir,” she replied, stifling a smile. “Why?”

“We need to teach Meira how to dance before lunchtime if we’re to have her ready for the ball tonight,” Galahad said, shoving back from the doorframe. “I’ll find her, and you get Ben Glennon to help you bring out the spinet.”

“Yes, sir,” Little Emblyn said, but Galahad was already heading toward the door.

He pushed through and stepped out into the bright, warm morning. Not a single cloud interrupted the sky, and a playful breeze caught at his hair. He

found the narrow, winding track that led down to the beach and trotted down it, listening as the roar of the ocean rose up before him.

At last, the path leveled out and met the sand, and he glanced out over the thundering surf. No haze obscured the mainland, for the sky shone bright and clear, and hundreds of white seagulls swooped near the whitecaps, and bobbed like corks upon the waves. He scanned the dark-sanded beach as his boots sank in, and he finally found her.

She wore a light blue dress and white sash, her hair all undone and swirling in the wind like a black flag. She stood with her bare feet in the wash of the foam, gazing out over the water. Galahad slowed his pace, sensing that he was intruding upon her thoughts.

But all at once, she turned and looked at him—just as she always did when he thought she didn't know he was there. She gave him a small smile, then turned back to watch the dip and yaw of the flock of gulls.

He drew up next to her, studying her profile, and the wistful distance in her gaze. The waves washed over her feet and made her suck in a breath, as if a thrill had gone through her body.

"Do you miss it?" he asked quietly. She didn't look at him. But she nodded slowly.

He didn't answer, just turned and let the steady roll wash over his hearing. He took a deep breath of the briny air—unmatched anywhere else—and his brow furrowed.

"I would too," he murmured. He felt her glance at him, but he didn't turn. Then, he took another breath to resettle his thoughts.

"Come back to the house with me," he said. "We need to teach you to dance before the ball."

She shot him a look of surprise, which he finally met.

"You won't be able to participate in many dances," he said. "But I think you can learn the waltz in time. It's simple enough."

She stared at him, then suddenly laughed.

He blinked.

"What?"

She kept chuckling, and shook her head. He frowned sharply at her.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She suppressed her laugh, and shot him a vivid sideways look—a look that suddenly flashed like lightning.

Galahad's attention sharpened.

She held out her hand.

"What?" he asked again, his voice low. She raised her eyebrows at him. And she nodded at her hand.

Galahad hesitated, his pulse suddenly pounding. But he reached out his left hand, and gripped her fingers.

Suddenly, a white heat shot up his arm and plunged into his heart.

He gasped, and reflexively clamped down on her hand. His gaze flew to her face—

She beamed at him…

Then stepped into the water.

No.

Onto the water.

Her graceful bare foot rested upon the surface of the wave that had just washed in. And as the wave drew back into the sea, Meira slid easily with it, taking slow steps *upon* the wave itself—tugging Galahad with her.

He instinctively leaned back—but it didn't matter. Somehow, the water beneath his boots mobilized and pulled him with her.

And then, *impossibly—*

He and Meira were suddenly standing *on top of* three feet of water.

He stared down at the swirling foam, feeling as if he was standing upon some mix of ice and snow—and each new wave bobbed *beneath* his feet, threatening to knock him over—

Meira abruptly came round in front of him, eclipsing his vision.

He jolted. His head came up and he grabbed hold of her, but she just grinned up into his face. She grasped his upper arms and held him steady, and he leaned on her, fighting for balance…

Slowly, he straightened, his breathing jagged and his face cold—but Meira's eyes twinkled. She slid her hand down his right arm, interlaced their fingers and gripped him tight. Then, she raised her eyebrows at him.

He took a deep breath. Then another. Then another.

And he nodded.

She turned and took off.

Meira shot forward, *out* to sea—and, as if pulled by a massive and unstoppable force, Galahad came with her.

She leaped like a deer over an oncoming wave, and he did the same, his heart thundering in his chest. Meira extended her smooth strides like an ice-skater, sending water spraying up all around her. Galahad squeezed her

hand even harder as he trailed behind—he tried to lean forward, tried not to lose his balance and fall…

He adjusted his grip on her hand, then forced one foot out in a sliding stride, then the other—

A huge wave rose up before them—white and roiling, like a looming hammer ready to crush them—

Meira struck the air with the back of her hand.

And the wave split in half.

She and Galahad burst through its remnants, icy water showering across them, spray exploding with sunlight.

Galahad gasped and shook his head as water drenched him, and he and Meira erupted onto the high seas. Sunshine poured down over the rolling, churning mirror, and the seagulls cried out to them—as if in recognition and amazement.

They picked up speed, Meira taking long, powerful strides up the back of a wave. Galahad, chills racing over his skin, threw himself after her, keeping hold of her hand—

And they flew off the top of the wave.

Galahad's heart suspended.

Meira whirled him around in mid-air, wrapped her arm round his waist and caught him to her.

They spun high in the air, seawater flying out from her skirts like a thousand diamonds—

Then they plunged straight down, landing upon the inner crest of the wave—they rode with it, skidding down its length with their knees bent low, their hair flying, their arms outstretched…

Galahad lowered further and dragged his left hand across the blinding, icy, rippling water—

Meira leaped up. He did the same.

They tucked their legs in tight and hurdled over another wave, sparkles showering their heads, their arms spread as if they were birds.

Their feet struck the water at a blazing speed, their reflections rippling over the surface, the sunlight cascading through the waves, breaking in rainbows that caught Galahad and Meira head-on. Golden foam splashed their clothes and soaked them through; the sea roared in mighty laughter.

And then, of a sudden, she let go of him.

He almost lost his balance; his hand stretched out to search for hers—

She whirled out in front of him, leaped over a wave, and began skating just out of reach. Another wave rolled up to meet her and she twirled on top of it like a ballerina, then skated backward down its crest, grinning impishly at him the whole way.

And Galahad abruptly realized that he wasn't sinking.

His heart calmed. His feet steadied beneath him.

And he leaped forward.

He flung himself over the wave, landed hard and firm, and swept after her, leaning in and pumping his arms—and in four mighty strides, he caught up with her.

She laughed out loud, pivoted around—her hair spinning out behind her—and fell into stride beside him. Together, as one, they flew over the waves, skipping across the ripples, sliding round the eddies, splashing over the whitecaps and crashing straight through the surf like dolphins, like skiers, like fish, like eagles. In tandem, weaving in and out of each other's paths, leaning down to rake their fingers through the shimmering surface, or to wind up and slap the edge of a breaker. They tore across the water, ripping it wide, their feet making flying wakes behind them.

Then, a huge rock rose up before them—black, jagged, volcanic stone, atop which perched a dozen seagulls. The waves hurled him toward it, and the surf shattered against its face.

Meira latched onto his hand.

And with a sudden *jerk*—

She lifted him up and out of the water—

And they landed like dancers on a lower shelf of the massive stone. The next second, the wave beat into the rock and smashed across it, showering them with water.

Galahad ducked away as the wave drenched him, then shook his hair out of his eyes. Meira let out a laugh and spread her arms, letting the cold water pour over her. A shivering thrill coursed through Galahad's whole body, and he almost laughed too—but the breath was stolen from him.

For, to his amazement, he could now see the tip of Metern, with Perlkastel gleaming like a jewel at its peak, an entire league away. He raked his sopping hair out of his face, still panting, and faced Meira.

Her hair didn't look wet. It cascaded down around her in beautiful curls, droplets of water shimmering like gems in every strand, and upon her

eyelashes and her rosy cheeks. And even as he watched, the water drained off her clothes and the wind caught her skirt, tousling it in greeting. She met his gaze, still harboring a secret smile. He swiped the water off his face, trying to calm his labored breathing, then shook his head.

"You still don't know how to waltz."

"Hahaha!" She slapped a hand over her mouth, then brought her hand down and clasped her wrist behind her back, clearly trying to iron out her expression.

But he leaned right toward her, and pierced her with a look of challenge.

Her eyebrows went up, and she gave him a wide, sideways glance.

Without saying anything more, he turned and approached the far side of the rock—the side that faced the channel and the mainland. Out there, the sea lay calmer, like a shimmering floor of silver. He paused a moment, gauging the waves…

Then stepped out onto the water.

It held him.

He stopped, took a deep breath, then drew himself up and turned around.

Meira was giving him a surprised—but somehow pleased—expression. He lifted his chin, and held out his left hand.

Her expression of surprise turned into one of coy amusement. And then, she hopped nimbly down, and took his hand.

Without waiting, Galahad pulled her in.

He wrapped his right hand around her waist and took up her right hand in his left.

Meira's head came up, and shock flashed in her eyes. But her free hand settled on his shoulder—

And Galahad drew her out onto the easy waves, his swift steps singing through the sea. Meira's gaze flew back and forth, trying to calculate where to put her feet…

He pulled her tighter, so that her full body pressed against his. She met his eyes…

He threw her out into a twirl.

Her skirt flung glimmering spray into the sky, her hair splashed against the vibrancy of the sun's glare.

Galahad skated backward, pulling her with him. She followed, panting and wide-eyed and grinning. Soon, they were racing pell-mell over the

smooth surface. He pulled her in again, wrapping her up and spinning round and round—

He swung her out in another wild twirl, and she squealed with laughter.

Suddenly, the seagulls swooped down around them, spiraling in a whirlwind, clucking and chiggling, cutting the wind with their sharp wings and then soaring straight up—

Galahad spun with Meira in his arms again, and schools of silver fishes leaped up past their knees, peppering the waves and blinding the edges of Galahad's vision. Joining with the gulls and the waves in a deep, exhilarating and resounding music that Galahad had never known.

He and Meira began weaving back and forth, always clasping hands, trading grasps, spinning under each other's arms; improvising without words, exchanging brilliant looks though the shimmering spray—tugging each other one way, then the other, pulling and pushing in equal measure, skimming and sweeping across their infinite ballroom floor, beneath the limitless dome of the heavens. Their fingers warm, their faces showered with cold water, their clothes drenched, and a fiery heat in their hearts.

And then, without warning, the waves surged all around them. Soared high, and threatened to sweep over their heads.

Galahad yanked on Meira's hand and she came to him—he threw an arm around her, and together they ducked down and rode the wave…

And all at once, it tossed them up on shore.

Galahad stumbled. His feet sank through the water and hit the shallow sand. Meira caught against him, her skirts dragging in the surf. She let out a weary laugh, absently grabbed his left hand, and together they slogged up onto the beach.

Galahad suddenly felt all his muscles trembling, and for a second, his vision blinked in and out. He took several deep breaths as a deep chill from his sopping clothes sank through him. Their feet dragged through the sand, and Meira turned around and flopped down to sit. She leaned back on her hands, closed her eyes and tilted her head back, still panting, but smiling.

Galahad couldn't speak as he stood there in front of her. His head reeled and he felt faint, as if he'd just awakened from a dream. And yet, he was soaked to the bone, and so was she. And even now, as she sat there, bathed in sunlight, the water danced across her skin and hair like the most beautiful adornments of any queen. And when she opened her eyes and looked at

him, his heart, unaccountably, made the same terrified pang as it had when he found himself walking on water.

"Sir?"

Galahad twitched and his head came around—

There was Little Emblyn, standing at the mouth of a path.

Their path. Their beach.

The sea had brought them home.

"Sir, the spinet is ready," she called—then gave him and Meira a funny look. "What happened? Did someone drown?"

Meira giggled. Galahad shot her a wry look. The very idea of tamely stepping round in a circle to the docile clinking of a spinet…

He pushed his dripping hair out of his face again.

"I'm sorry, Emblyn," he answered. "We don't need to teach Meira how to dance."

And when he looked back down at her, she simply smiled up at him. No coyness, no challenge. Just a soft smile.

He stepped up to her, and held out his hand.

She brushed her hand off on her dress, then reached up and took his. He lifted her easily, she hiked up her weighty skirts, and as one, they climbed back up the path with Little Emblyn toward the house.

Chapter Fifteen

“Which dress did you choose, Emblyn?” Galahad called up the stairwell as he adjusted his cuff.

“The one with the flowers, sir,” she shouted back down.

Galahad stood in the entryway wearing his velvet suit again, ready and waiting. He’d heard the royal coach sent to fetch them pull up a few moments ago. Now Meira just needed to come down.

As soon as they had arrived back at the house, he’d told Little Emblyn to draw Meira up a hot bath, and he took hot water for himself up to his room and had a complete wash. Then, he’d put on his nightclothes and fallen asleep on his bed for four hours—a deeper sleep than he remembered enjoying in months. When he’d finally awakened, he’d gone downstairs to eat something, then retreated to his room to prepare for the ball. Little Emblyn hadn’t allowed him in the kitchen, of course, as she said she was washing Meira’s hair with rose oils and lavender.

Footsteps sounded toward the top of the staircase, and Galahad turned to look…

Meira glided down the stairs, all on her own. She wore a long, flowing gown of pale pink, covered in delicate pink-and-white silk roses. The off-the-shoulder neckline displayed the beauty of her pale throat, and the nearly-transparent sleeves hugged her graceful arms. The roses wrapped her slender bodice, and the skirt clouded all around her like wisps of a dream. Her dark hair was done back in a high, full braid—curling tendrils dancing by her temples and around her neck. Her cheeks flushed pink, her lips dark rose, her grey eyes lively and bright. Little Emblyn had wound roses in amongst Meira’s chestnut tresses, but otherwise she wore no jewelry or adornment. She looked like the grand lady in a fairy court.

The train of her gown spilled down the stairs behind her, and as Galahad drew in a stunned breath, he caught the intoxicating scent of rose and lavender that floated all around her.

She saw him staring, and beamed at him.

He cleared his throat, and sought out Little Emblyn, who’d ventured down the landing.

“Well done, Emblyn,” he said.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” Little Emblyn exchanged a cheeky look with Meira. “But I can’t take *all* the credit.”

Meira grinned up at the maid, then ducked her head again. Galahad’s gaze fell upon her once more, for he suddenly couldn’t think of a reply. Meira risked a glance up and saw him…

And she blushed.

Galahad blinked.

Tap, tap, tap!

Galahad lunged to the door and pulled it open.

“Are you ready, sir?” the royal footman smiled and tipped his plumed hat.

“Yes, we are,” Galahad answered, straightening his waistcoat. “Thank you.”

He faced Meira again, and held out his arm to her.

She inclined her head, then gave him a perfect curtsey. She arose like a blooming flower, stretched out her white hand and took his arm.

“Have a lovely night, little Cinder Girl!” Little Emblyn called after her, and Meira waved.

Galahad led her out the door, down the stoop and into the evening warmth. The decorated carriage waited, and the footman opened the door and pulled down the steps. Galahad helped Meira inside, and stood there waiting as she arranged her skirts. Then, she shot him a questioning look.

“I’m not riding,” he said. “I’m coming with you.” He hesitated. “If you don’t mind.”

She slowly smiled, then beckoned to him.

He climbed up into the coach, careful of her delicate skirts, and sat down on the plush bench across from her. The footman put up the stairs and slammed the door. And in a moment, the whip cracked, and they were off.

Galahad had never seen a palace like this.

Perlkastel’s entire garden stood alight with multicolored lanterns, all blazing with incense. The earthy scents mixed with the perfume of the roses to make a heady, romantic concoction that lifted to the stars. The rose gardens themselves looked like tapestries, the flames within the lanterns

like dancing sprites. The palace had been lit by huge bowls of flame covered in colored tints—the façade blazed with living blues, purples, greens and yellows that intermingled like spirits. Dozens of lamps hung in every window, each made of a different shade of Spegel glass; each fracturing and refracting light into magical rainbows out upon the front drive. Torches burned upon the tops of the domes and in the corners of the roof, showing off the extraordinary designs upon the walls, creating the illusion that the fantastical creatures were following the guests with their eyes.

Galahad stood with Meira before the open gate of Perlkastel, silently marveling at the shining edifice. He looked down at Meira, who still gripped his left arm. She grinned up at the palace, radiating excitement. He leaned closer to her head.

“Perhaps you can teach the king a few steps,” he murmured.

Meira’s grin broadened, and she bounced up on her toes.

Galahad took a deep breath, and started forward. Meira followed without hesitation, and they passed through the gate.

They followed the lit path across the courtyard, stepped between two guards, and turned left into a tall, open door draped in garlands. They passed through a short marble walkway lit by blue flame, their shoes tapping on the polished stone, and up to the gorgeously-ornate glass doors to the ballroom. They waited just a moment as two guards drew the doors open…

And they stepped out onto the grand staircase landing.

Before them spread a huge, white-marble ballroom, whose floor was inlaid with spectacular gold designs of ships and sea-creatures—and mermaids. Ten Spegel crystal chandeliers shone like suns from the arched ceiling, and white rose garlands wound around every towering pillar.

A ten-piece orchestra, dressed in lavish uniforms bedecked in lace, plumes and velvet, tuned and experimented on their gleaming stringed instruments from their place at the far end of the ballroom. And littering the dancing floor itself…

A hundred guests, men and women. The women wore vivid, dark, rich colors of scarlet and violet and emerald and sapphire, their throats and ears sparkling with jewels, their curls piled gracefully atop their heads or allowed to tumble across their shoulders like waterfalls. The men wore velvet capes of all colors, brilliant doublets, embroidered waistcoats,

matching trousers and polished shoes. They all stood milling about, talking and smiling and admiring each other.

And there, in the center of the room, next to Sir Gawain and Sir Tristan, stood the king. He wore a magnificent doublet and trousers of deep scarlet embroidered in gold and silver, with a half cape, and he spoke quietly to Sir Gawain.

Galahad held Meira there at the top of the staircase, holding his breath, waiting for the prince to turn, to look up, to see her…

"Tres magnifique!"

Galahad glanced to the left to see Sir Lancelot halfway up the stairs, dressed just as splendidly in light blue, his hand over his heart.

"Lady Meira, how beautiful you are," Lancelot cried quietly, wide-eyed. "The most beautiful woman I have ever seen—I swear upon my life."

Meira chuckled and dipped her head in thanks.

"Pardon, monsieur," he bowed to Galahad. "Will you allow me to take the lady to the king? He must see her or he will not believe me when I tell him!" Lancelot held out his hand.

Galahad shifted back and released Meira with a bow, and allowed Lancelot to take her hand. With an extremely careful and genteel manner, Lancelot led her down the stairs, and attentively drew her through the crowd toward the center of the room.

Galahad remained where he was for a moment, then silently descended the side of the stairs and made for the edge of the room, near the pillars. Several older women, elegantly adorned, sat at tables there, drinking punch fanning themselves with lace fans, and gossiping. Galahad grasped his hands behind his back, and slowly maneuvered around behind the pillars. Finally, he paused by one of them, eying Lancelot and Meira through the mixing of the crowd.

Lancelot drew to a halt, and made a deep bow, and Meira followed by performing a graceful curtsey. Sir Gawain and Sir Tristan immediately turned and stared at Meira, and then, when the king saw her, his mouth opened—but no words came out.

Lancelot arose and addressed her, and then stood back from her and gestured to her gown, as if he had found some marvelous treasure.

The prince met her eyes, as if he only halfway heard Lancelot, and beamed at her. He then stepped up to her and held out his hand, halfway bowed, and spoke to her—and she nodded. She delicately grasped his

fingers, and then Sir Gawain turned and pushed through the crowd and said something into the ear of the musical director, who then nodded.

The director tapped his baton on his music stand, and the musicians lifted their instruments. And with a flourish, the director gave the cue.

The musicians burst into a sweet, light, lilting tune. Everyone on the dance floor immediately paired up, and the king led Meira to the very center. With a sweep, he pulled her into his arms.

And just like that, they were dancing.

Meira's dress whirled like a summer breeze as they waltzed around the great circle. She followed the king's lead effortlessly, beaming at him every time she caught his eye—and he returned her smiles without hesitation.

The rest of the dancers spiraled round and round the huge chamber, the women like flower nymphs, the men like elves, the music evoking all the lively brilliance of a spring morning.

The king twirled Meira out, and she extended with graceful ease, her skirts swirling. And then the king tugged her in, pulling her tight to him, and executed a dizzying spin that caused the other dancers to laugh and retreat. Then, the king spun her out again, caught her, and waltzed with her in a fast, commanding round that drove the others back—and soon, the rest of the dancers had stopped altogether, and stood marveling at the splendid pair.

They didn't seem to need words—they spoke with looks and laughs, and every single signal the king gave her, Meira understood, and she came right with him. Their feet flew and skipped and leaped, and soon Galahad could tell they were improvising together, moving freely with the music—the king, from years and years of practice; Meira from a natural and perfect instinct. They were having a conversation Galahad could never be privy to, even if he stood right beside them.

"What a beautiful couple!" one of the grey-haired ladies who sat in front of Galahad remarked to another.

"I hear she is a Curse-Breaker!" said the other, waving her blue fan. "And you know, they rank higher than even royalty."

"Do they? I didn't know that," said the first. "Goodness…So, she is rather like a queen, then?"

"It's a splendid match," said the second. "And just look at the way His Majesty *looks* at her!"

“Ah, but who can blame him?” asked the first. “She is easily the loveliest girl in the room. Why, the other gentlemen hardly know who they’re dancing with—they’re so busy staring at her. Even if she *is* wearing the same floral pattern all the other girls are.”

Galahad looked sharply at the back of her head. Then, he instantly searched the crowd of dancers….

She was right. About half the other ladies wore dresses similar to Meira’s—if not in color, in style, and all decorated with flowers.

“My nephew is one of the king’s advisors, you know,” the second woman spoke up. “And he says this lady has been spending a great deal of time here at the palace, with the king. My nephew says His Majesty is quite smitten with her.”

“Oh, I can see that,” said the first. “I have seen His Majesty, when he was a prince, dance with a good many lovely girls—but he has never smiled so much, nor danced so long, with any of them.”

“I suppose we’ll hear an announcement soon, then,” nodded the second. “After tonight, he can’t keep it a secret any longer—it’s clear he desires her, and everyone must certainly approve. Now that he’s to ascend to the throne, she’ll certainly make a pretty queen!”

Galahad shifted, folding his arms and trying not to listen any more. But of course, it was impossible not to hear them.

“Ah,” the first sighed, smiling dreamily. “Just look at how he holds her in his arms!”

“And how dearly she looks into his face!” added the second. “Do you know…I believe she is quite in love with him herself!”

Galahad backed up, turned away, and clenched his teeth. And without a backward glance, he swept past the pillars, up the staircase and out of the palace, quite certain that no one noted his absence.

At the stroke of midnight, guests began filtering out of the palace, and lights in the outer wings began going out. Galahad climbed stiffly out of the carriage, ran a hand through his hair, and pulled down the stairs himself. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall of the coach, watching the ladies and gentlemen disperse into the night.

“Has your headache improved, sir?” the driver called down to him. He sighed.

“Somewhat, thank you,” he replied. “Nothing sleep can’t cure.”

“I’ve found that’s true for many things, haven’t you?” the driver remarked.

“In most cases,” Galahad murmured absently…

For just then, Meira emerged into the courtyard, on the arm of a smiling and handsome Sir Tristan. He escorted her through the gates, and when she pointed to her own carriage, he led her straight to it.

Galahad pushed off the coach and strode up to them, meeting them halfway.

“Thank you, Sir Tristan,” Galahad inclined his head to the knight. “I appreciate your protecting Lady Meira whilst I was indisposed.”

“Not at all,” Sir Tristan said, putting a hand to his heart. “The pleasure and honor were mine. But I must say,” he shot a playful look at Meira. “She did not want for a…how do you say? *El galán?”* He laughed briefly. “A gentleman to gladly do anything she asked.”

Meira laughed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Thank you again,” Galahad said briskly, holding out his arm to Meira. “We must be going.”

“I shall give your regards to the king,” Sir Tristan said as he relinquished Meira.

Meira nodded earnestly to him, then took Galahad’s arm, and let herself be guided back to the coach.

Galahad said nothing as she climbed inside, and he followed after her, again cautious not to tread on her skirts. The footmen put up the stairs and slammed the door, and in a bit, they headed down the hill through the terraced garden.

Galahad stared out the window at the lamps that flashed by outside, his jaw set. Soon, though, he sensed Meira watching him. He glanced over to see her frowning, her gaze intense and penetrating.

He took a deep breath and cleared his expression, then nodded.

“You did well,” he said.

She waited, but he didn’t say any more. She tilted her head and tapped her forehead with her fingertip.

“Yes, I had a headache,” he lied, turning to look out the window again. “I’m in need of sleep.”

She slowly lowered her hand, and didn’t sign anything more. And he didn’t look at her the rest of the drive.

Chapter Sixteen

Galahad was up at dawn, striding into the kitchen just as Little Emblyn pulled fresh bread out of the oven. The scent filled the room as she drew the wooden peel out with both hands, swung around and slid the long loaf onto the counter.

“Good morning, sir. Would you like a piece once it’s cooled a bit?” she asked him.

“Yes, thank you,” Galahad nodded, walking through to the larder, opening the door and fetching the butter and a small tankard of beer. He brought it round and out into the dining room and sat down. A moment later, Little Emblyn emerged with a plate of two generous slices of bread, and a knife. She set them in front of Galahad, and he buttered the first piece. The butter began to melt instantly.

“Where’s Meira?” Galahad asked.

“Still asleep, sir,” Little Emblyn answered, wiping her hands on her apron. “I thought it best, after dancing all night.”

Galahad nodded and buttered his other piece.

“She thinks you are displeased with her, sir.”

Galahad stopped, and looked up to see Little Emblyn standing back uncertainly. He considered her a moment, then shook his head once.

“Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Oh, I’m glad, sir,” Little Emblyn said in a rush, beaming. “Did they think she was *very* beautiful?”

He cleared his throat.

“They did.”

“And what about the prince?”

“What about him?” Galahad picked up the first piece and took a bite.

“Did he dance with her all night? Did he fall in love with her?” she pressed in hushed excitement, stepping closer to the table. “Are they going to be married?”

Galahad put half the bread down and took a drink of beer.

“He danced with her, though I don’t know if he danced *every* dance, since I left and sat in the coach,” Galahad said, not looking at her. “I have no insight at all into the workings of his heart. But there is *talk*…” he paused whilst lifting the bread to his mouth again. “…amongst the members of the court, at least…that he may consider marrying her.”

Emblyn suddenly jumped in the air, clapped her hands and squealed, then dashed back into the kitchen. Soon, the sound of clanging pots issued, and she triumphantly started to sing as she worked.

Galahad glared down at the bread—but he made himself finish it, and half the beer, before he arose and left the house to saddle Thondorfax.

The roar of the sea echoed up and down the central lane of Megipesk, with its whitewashed houses and well-dressed inhabitants. Still, the fishermen plied their wares near the docks, and the shouts from the market stalls bounced against the stone of the streets and the buildings.

Galahad tied Thondorfax outside the door of the milliner—a beautifully-appointed shop with lace curtains in the windows. Galahad hopped up the steps and pushed through the door.

All the walls had been whitewashed inside, also, and the broad windows let in vast amounts of daylight, which poured over the work tables where several young ladies, all wearing starched dresses and white caps, busily sewed by hand. And, in one corner with a table and window all to herself, another young lady worked with snow-white cotton upon a reeling, rattling sewing machine.

All around the back half of the shop stood floor-to-ceiling open shelves that held bolts of colorful fabric. Upon stands in the several corners, extravagant gowns stood there on display.

None of the young women looked up from their work as he entered—which he could understand—but a middle-aged woman in a similar white cap emerged through a door that led to a large back room, clasped her hands and smiled at him.

“Hello, Curse-Breaker,” she greeted him. “Has Lady Meira enjoyed the dresses she has worn thus far?”

“Yes, they fit her well,” he answered.

“Which did she wear to the king’s birthday?” the shop mistress asked.

Galahad realized that the other girls had finally stopped sewing and had lifted their heads to listen.

“She wore the pink, with roses,” he replied.

“Ah, a perfect choice!” the shopkeeper beamed. “How did she look?”

Galahad now heard the girls lean forward in their chairs. He glanced around at them, then managed an answer.

“Quite…beautiful.”

The shopkeeper laughed.

“She must have done, to win such praise from *you!”*

The girls stifled giggles.

“I would like to commission two more dresses,” Galahad cut in, ignoring them. “For day dresses at court. And one more that’s suited to a ball.”

“Of course,” the shopkeeper replied. “Which colors?”

“She doesn’t have yellow yet, or green,” he answered, glancing around at the bolts of fabric.

“What about the gown?” the shopkeeper wondered.

Galahad didn’t answer.

His attention had fixed on a row of four fabrics that gave off a subdued, unearthly shimmer.

“What is that?” he murmured.

“What?” the shopkeeper asked.

“That,” he said, crossed the room, moved around the counter and approached the fabric. He tugged off his gloves, stuffed them in his belt, then carefully reached out to touch them.

One was turquoise, the other deep green, and the last a stormy blue—shimmering above and pulsing beneath. They felt light and delicate to his fingers, and gave way like…

Like water.

“Oh, those are our only Fortryllet fabrics,” the shopkeeper sighed as she stepped up next to him. “They are very old, but of course they don’t wear or gather dust. Not one of us here knows how to craft with it…” she sighed again. “But I cannot bear to put them in a dark attic. Nothing elvish should ever sit in the dark.”

“I want all three,” Galahad said.

The shopkeeper jumped.

“Wh—You do?”

Galahad faced her.

“I know what to do with these fabrics,” he said. “And I will take all three bolts.”

The girls let out exclamations, but the shopkeeper’s face turned red with delight.

“Right away, sir!” and she pulled them down from the shelf, laid them out so one of her girls could package them, and then took down the rest of his order in writing, so excited she could hardly hold a pen.

Galahad tied the large parcel to Thondorfax’s saddle, making certain to balance it so it wouldn’t swing, and was just about to mount up when a frantic hubbub began near the town square. Galahad paused, his foot in the stirrup, and watched as people stopped mid-conversation, or burst out of shop doors, took off, hurried downhill and turned left.

“What is it?” he called to a bespectacled clerk who dashed past, holding his wide-brimmed hat down. The clerk skidded on his buckled shoes and whipped around to look at him.

“The king’s herald’s just ridden to the square,” he panted. “Best come quick!” And he ran off.

Galahad frowned, but climbed onto Thondorfax, turned him and followed the crowd.

Soon, the people thickened in front of him, and no longer moved forward. Galahad, glad he was astride a tall horse, could see over their heads. Perhaps a thousand people had pressed into the town square, and a finely-dressed herald stood atop the wooden platform in the center. Three trumpeters stood beside him, and they blasted a quick call in unison. Then, they snapped their instruments under their arms, and stood at attention. The herald then unrolled a scroll with brass handles, and held it at arm’s length out in front of him.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” he shouted, his fine voice booming out over the heads of the villagers. “A proclamation from our king! Three days hence, His Majesty Aethelred Alexander Richard Augustus Edward James the First shall be crowned King of all Mhuirlan! At which time, he invites the entire island of Metern to his royal festivities.”

A great cheer rocked the town square, startling some of the horses. Hundreds of people threw their hats and waved their hands. Thondorfax just snorted, and Galahad simply listened.

The herald waited, suppressing a smile, then held up the proclamation again. The people, excited for more, pressed in closer.

“Furthermore,” the herald continued. “His Majesty will be receiving a *most esteemed* guest from the island of Hanter-Broder: Her Ladyship Beatrix Graigh of the castle of Arsa Coill.”

Murmurs raced through the people—though they sounded pleased. Thondorfax lifted his head and pricked his ears up.

And a strange jolt traveled through Galahad’s whole frame.

“Her ship shall arrive at noon upon the day of the festival,” the herald went on. “And the king orders that *all* of you be here to help him receive this most beauteous and respected friend of the royal household.”

The villagers broke into applause and cheered again.

Galahad pulled on the reins and gently ordered Thondorfax to back directly out of the crowd. Soon, they had cleared the edge of the group of people, about-faced and trotted back up the street, up the hill—and he urged Thondorfax into a gallop as soon as they crossed the town’s border.

Galahad left Thondorfax outside and carried the bolts of fabric into the house under his arm. He charged straight in, without taking off his cape, and glanced sideways into the dining room.

Meira sat in Galahad’s usual place, a cup of tea between her hands, wearing her dressing gown, her hair in a messy braid over her shoulder. Little Emblyn sat across from her, and both young women were laughing. Galahad turned into the parlor and set the wrapped bolts on the couch.

When the door slammed shut, Little Emblyn immediately got up and hurried after him.

“Everything all right, sir?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, only now straightening up to pull off his cape. “A herald came while I was in town and made an announcement.”

“An announcement?” she cried, then spun around to give Meira a wide, ecstatic grin. Meira blushed, but her eyes sought out Galahad. Galahad pushed past Little Emblyn and hung up his cape in the hall, and pulled off his gloves.

“The king is to be crowned three days from now, and the people of Megipesk are invited to a dance and feast afterward,” Galahad said. “He also commanded the whole town to come to the docks at noon on that day to receive a special guest of the king’s, from the isle of Hanter-broder.”

Little Emblyn tripped on the rug and almost fell—she caught herself as she hurried back into the dining room—but all the while she frowned hard at Galahad. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw Meira giving him the same expression.

“Who?” Little Emblyn demanded.

Another chill passed through Galahad’s frame, and he finally faced them squarely.

“Her name is Lady Beatrix Greigh of the castle of Arsa Coill,” he said quietly.

Meira lost some of her color. Little Emblyn just frowned more fiercely.

“Beatrix Greigh…”

“Apparently a longtime friend of the royal family,” Galahad answered. “And she has an elvish surname.”

Little Emblyn exchanged a startled look with Meira.

“Elvish? She’s part elf?”

“She may be,” Galahad said. “And she lives in a stronghold that the elves built. Arsa Coill means ‘ancient forest.’”

“Oh…She’s going to be *so* beautiful…” Little Emblyn whispered—and she too went pale.

“We don’t need to be alarmed yet,” Galahad cut in. “For all we know, Lady Beatrix is the king’s godmother.” He gave them both firm looks. “Just do your utmost to make yourselves ready for the coronation. That’s all any of us can do.” And with that, he returned to the parlor, picked up the bolts of fabric, and carried them up to his bedroom.

“Sir?”

Galahad stopped brushing Thondorfax and came round to the opening of the stall to see Little Emblyn standing there, her apron wrapped around her hands.

“Yes?” he asked, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. Little Emblyn bit her lip, then took a careful breath.

“I know who Lady Beatrix is,” she said. “And she isn’t the king’s godmother.”

Galahad set the brush on the top of the stall and stepped toward her, listening. Little Emblyn reluctantly met his eyes.

“She is the daughter of old friends of the former king and queen,” she said. “The prince—His Majesty, now—and his parents have gone visiting them since he was just a boy. Lady Beatrix is also an only child, since her younger sister died two years ago of fever madness.”

A pang shot through Galahad’s heart. Little Emblyn took another difficult breath and went on.

“I’ve never seen her, sir, but she’s said to be very fair, and lovely, and everyone who meets her truly likes her.” Her voice quieted. “I’ve heard she is King James’ favorite and oldest friend.”

Galahad glanced over at Thondorfax. The horse met his gaze, and pricked up his ears. Galahad turned back to Little Emblyn.

“Since you know the king better than Meira or I,” he said. “What do you suggest we do?”

She shrugged.

“I’m sure I don’t know, sir,” she said quietly. “Aside from trying to make him jealous.”

Galahad stared at her.

But Little Emblyn said no more. Instead, she curtseyed, and left the barn.

Slowly, Galahad looked at his horse—who just silently looked back at him.

Setting his jaw, Galahad snatched the brush down and returned to what he’d been doing.

Late that night, after Little Emblyn and Meira had gone to bed, and all the lamps in the house had been extinguished, Galahad carried the bolts of fabric into the library and shut the door behind him.

He lifted his free hand and snapped his fingers.

The lamps and candles all blazed to life. He stepped around the couch and carefully laid the three fabrics out, side by side, leaning them upright

against the back of the couch. He took a step back, and narrowed his eyes at each of them in turn.

He drew in deep, purposeful breaths, and held out his right hand, palm up, gently opening his fingers.

And as he watched, the deep green fabric began to ripple, as if sunlight disturbed a great depth of seawater. He let the enchanted elvish fabric stir for a moment, then snapped his fingers again.

It slowly began to unwind itself from the board, picking up speed as it did, and lifted like a spirit into the air in front of him. He took another step back, studying the flowing length. Then, when it had all come loose, he reached out and took hold of the end.

He immediately wound it around his hand, flung it straight up, then yanked it down.

With a great *flap,* the fabric took a sudden shape: a general hourglass form, with the bottom rustling uneasily like waves caught in tidepools. Galahad stepped around it, to the back, grasped the fabric there with both hands and tugged it tighter.

The fabric synched into a definite waist, and remained. He came round to the front again, tilted his head sideways, then took hold of the neckline and folded it down into a straight line above the bust. The excess fabric melted into the rest of itself, as if this fold were its true edge. He then pushed the sides of the fabric out of the way of the shoulders, and they melted down too, to create a sleeveless, strapless silhouette. He came around the dress again, and tugged the back edge of it down to create a gentle U shape that would scoop down below the shoulder blades.

Once he faced the dress again—for it did look like a dress, now—he regarded the turquoise fabric.

Instantly, it started sparkling in anticipation, like the shallow, tropical water near the port of Nerrinton—aquamarine water atop snow-white sands. He snapped his fingers, and this fabric sprang off the board so fast that the board immediately came loose and toppled onto the floor. The blindingly-bright fabric flew to him and he caught it in both hands, then knelt down in front of the formed garment. He gripped the edge of the turquoise and pinched it against the middle of the green skirt.

The two fabrics bled together, like oil paint—and Galahad smeared the turquoise up into the green with long, tight strokes. The turquoise fabric obediently wrapped around the bottom half of the skirt, and Galahad, on his

knees, worked his way around it to draw the turquoise up into the green, and the green down into the turquoise, with swift, deft, brush-stroke movements of his fingertips. When he came round to the front again, the turquoise had fully fastened to the green, and fanned out all around, dragging on the floor behind.

Galahad got up, moved to the corner of the library and pulled out a book he had spotted earlier. Leaning toward a lamp, he flipped through the pages till he arrived at a full-page drawing of a spiral, halved nautilus shell. He came back to the dress and pressed his hand over the drawing. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment…

Then bent and pressed that same hand to the skirt.

The nautilus illustration splattered all over the skirt in a repeated swirling pattern, growing larger and smaller to fill all the space. Galahad set the book aside on the floor, picked up the very bottom of the skirt and shook it. The pattern faded and retreated up the skirt, so that around the circumference, the nautilus design looked as if it had bled away into the water.

Galahad arose, and pointed to the stormy blue fabric. As he watched, the depths of it began to roil, like the reflection of hurricane clouds upon the deepest part of the sea. It slowly unrolled itself from the board, and boiled toward him through the air, churning and twisting. He took hold of it and brought it round to the front. He took a corner and turned it so it pointed upward, and pressed the very corner to the invisible breastbone of his mannequin, right where her collarbones would meet. He then drew that stormy fabric down in an inverted V shape, and wrapped it all around behind her. The fabric fought him, as if it didn't understand what he wanted. Galahad slowed down, peering over to the back, and pinched the blue to the green, right in the small of the air-mannequin's back. The fabric instantly relaxed, tumbling down all around the green dress and, upon the chest and at the small of the back, became one with it.

Taking another breath, he backed up, then knelt down in front of the dress again, grasped the blue fabric, then drew his forefinger straight up the center, to a point just below the bust.

The fabric split right where he had drawn, and took on an inverted V ruffle, revealing the stunning green skirt beneath. Galahad then came round to the back where excess fabric lay in elegant tumbles upon the floor. He gathered it up, then drew another line…

The green, turquoise and blue fabrics sliced free of the rest, and he stood up with the new pieces in his hand. Briskly, he pinched the top edges and they sealed together. He then pressed the center of this wide length to the top-center of the dress' back with his forefinger. It stayed there, as if he had stitched it so. Then, he tossed the right and left ends toward his invisible frame…

And the cloth caught haphazardly on unseen arms. He attended to the right arm first—stepped to that side and wrapped, pressed and tightened until he created a partial sleeve—just enough to form a sort of cuff on the upper arm. The fabric then split, leaving all the rest of the shoulder and arm bare, and fabric hanging down far past the elbow and behind the form, in a wing-like cape. He did the same to the other arm, then drew back, spread his fingers…

And the stormy pattern upon the blue of the cape illuminated, shooting light down through the green and turquoise layers—and each turned slightly-transparent, so that the colors of the others swam and rippled up through the surface.

Galahad then raked his fingers upward through the air, and the bottom edge of the cape shredded itself like a torn sail, and began moving with an unfelt breeze.

He rounded to the front of the dress once more, tipping his head in thought, then stepped in close and pointed toward the center of the breastbone.

The colors in the squally blue started spinning, and soon concentrated into a single point. Then, something bloomed from the fabric.

A violet, inverted teardrop jewel, encrusted in an antiqued-copper setting. The copper curled like filigree as it branched out both ways from the jewel to gently wrap down and around the bodice and then the waist of the dress. The copper then dripped down from the central jewel, and an emerald burst to life, in a sunburst setting.

Galahad lifted his finger and pointed up at the throat area, which as yet, stood empty.

A gold choker flashed into being, and from its center laced a delicate chain, which then attached to the point of the inverted V neckline. More large jewels blossomed on the neckline: the first round and sapphire, the others tear-shaped and either amethyst or emerald. Gold then showered

down from the sleeve cuffs in resplendent strands that sparkled with diamonds.

Galahad drew a circle in the air above the crown of the invisible head, and a delicate silver circlet was born, inlaid with sapphires that looked like captured stars.

Finally, he withdrew, standing directly in front of the fireplace, and looked his work up and down.

There was one more touch he wanted to add. But he would need Meira if he had any hope of it turning out well.

It would have to wait till the night of the coronation.

Chapter Seventeen

They rode on Thondorfax.

When the invitation had come to borrow a royal carriage, Galahad declined it, and set out to saddle his horse.

And as the evening deepened to night, and the brilliant stars burst through the darkness and the moon poured silvery light down upon them, Galahad and Meira rode on the back of the wind toward Perlkastel. Meira held fast to the front of the saddle and leaned against his chest, her hair billowing out over his shoulder. Thondorfax's mane and tail bannered in the warm, restless summer gusts, his pounding gait sending the two riders flying over the rolling moors. Scraw let out loud caws overhead, sometimes swooping low to brush by Galahad's hair, other times shooting up to the heavens.

They raced through the royal forest amongst legions of fireflies that lit the trees like fairies, blinking in a disjointed concert that made the entire wood look as though it shimmered gold. Scraw wove between the branches, darting far ahead of them down the path.

At last, they burst out of the wood, and charged up the garden lane toward the palace.

The bowls of flame that lit the façade stood uncovered tonight, and the palace itself seemed to glory in full, golden sun. Garlands of yellow roses adorned every window, and scarlet royal-crest flags hung from every wall and flew from every peak pole. A full regiment of guards lined the front gate in complete battle dress, their swords and helmets flashing.

All the ornate guest carriages were lined up and parked beside the lane. Everyone else had already gone inside the palace.

When they drew up in front of the guards, Thondorfax gave a mighty huff that sent dust flying, and he tossed his great head. Galahad dismounted, landed easily, and drew Meira down with him. She met his eyes, and he looked back at her. Then, he held out his left arm horizontally and bent his elbow—and she laid her forearm on top of his, and spread her fingers across the back of his hand.

Then, Galahad and Meira, together, lifted their chins and strode through the open gate. And Thondorfax followed, with Scraw perched on his saddle.

The guards gaped and stammered, but no one dared grasp the reins of that powerful beast. With slow, purposeful steps, Galahad and Meira strode through the courtyard, matching stride, and entered the decorated door. They passed through that same blue-flame, marble corridor, and advanced upon the tall glass doors.

Through them, Galahad could see the hundred dancers already swirling and twirling, and the powerful, beautiful music resounded through the panes. The guards, gaping at the oncoming party, scrambled to pull the doors open for them…

And, ahead of the horse and the raven, Galahad Stormcrane led Princess Meira into the light.

The skin of her graceful neck, shoulders, arms and face shimmered like mother of pearl. Her countenance shone with otherworldly light, her lips the shade of coral, her eyes shining with sailor's delight, her cheeks blushing like sunrise on the water. Her deep chestnut hair tumbled down past her waist in effortless, careless waves, banded only by her silver crown that flashed with blinding sapphires. Within her tresses winked thousands of effervescent lights, like water fairies hiding beneath the surface.

The colorful jewels upon her throat and breast pulsed with inner light—sunlight glimpsed through a wave. The stormy blue overlay clouded around her arms and out behind her in roiling waves that foamed at the shredded ends, turning to white vapor that twinkled like bursts of starlight. The patterned underlay of fathomless green and vivid aquamarine glimmered and gleamed with her every step, as if she had gathered together and draped the very waters of the great southern sea around herself. The golden slippers on her feet beamed with a dozen white pearls each, and the whole of her figure bathed in enraptured starlight.

Galahad did not turn to look at her—he kept his head erect, his eyes forward, but the magic radiating from her created a crystal-clear image of her in his mind. And as they descended the stairs with strength and resolve in every movement, the dancers slowed, hesitated, turned…

And they stared.

Galahad caught sight of Sir Tristan, Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain, all paired with young ladies, but they gaped at Meira—and at Thondorfax and

Scraw, who remained up on the landing like animal lords overseeing an ancient ritual.

And there was the new king, wearing sky blue, with a long, magnificent cape and high collar, and a flashing circlet of Metern silver. He danced with an elegant, middle-aged lady, all garbed in black, with dark hair and flashing black eyes.

But the king's attention caught on Meira, and even as he kept dancing, he stared past his partner at her.

Without a word or a glance to the king, Galahad turned to face Meira. Her eyes flashed to his in sudden uncertainty.

He said nothing. Instead, he slipped his right hand around her waist and took up her right hand in his left.

Then, he stepped even closer to her—far closer than ever before. And he pulled her into his chest.

Her eyes flickered—he felt her breathing quicken.

The music began. A single, soulful violin ringing out through the vast chamber, its lone voice calling like a gull into the wind.

Galahad felt the eyes of the king and the knights fix on him and Meira, even as the rest of the court kept dancing. But Galahad purposefully looked down at Meira, as if the other men didn't exist. Then, he leaned slightly to the side…

And led her into one long, sweeping step, followed by two quicker ones.

Meira followed instinctively, holding onto him loosely but attuning her body with his. Magic from Meira's dress hummed through Galahad's right hand, and as they gracefully turned, tendrils of her skirts washed around his legs like mist. She searched his face, but he never wavered. He turned her in the center of the ballroom, then again, then again…

A viola and a cello joined the violin, and the song deepened, swelling through the ballroom. The other men swept their ladies into a vast circle, and Galahad drew Meira along with the current.

The ladies' colorful gowns spun like opening flowers all around them, and the crystal chandeliers twinkled in the corners of Galahad's vision as he slowly turned with Meira around and around…

As they danced, Meira gracefully tilted her head back and to the side, so that with every downbeat and turn, her dark hair flagged out behind her, and her slender body leaned elegantly against Galahad's arm. And, as

he watched her, she closed her long-lashed eyes—but her every movement still matched his perfectly. As if she was listening to him beyond speech.

After they had made one round of the room, Galahad stepped back, and released her into a gentle twirl. Her eyes easily opened, and her dress eddied around her ankles as she went up on her toes and performed a perfect spin. Instead of drawing her back in, Galahad himself took a long step to close the distance, and took her in his arms for the next turn. His chin brushed her forehead, and the scent of sea wind upon the moors flooded his senses.

He could feel the music all around him—it felt immediate as breath, as if it resounded through his very bones. The rest of the crowd faded back in his mind until they virtually vanished—and he and Meira danced in the middle of the chamber floor. They stepped back from each other, then clasped hands and made a pass, in the elegant fashion of the country dances Galahad had learned as a boy. He twirled her under his arm, they faced each other…

Her eyes captured him. Brilliant as crystal, deep as the sea. She smiled at him, and reached out for him…

When their hands met, the warmth of her touch almost stung his fingers—yet he eagerly enfolded her hands in his. They swung around each other again, keeping time with the rising, aching music…

He gave her out to another twirl. Their arms fully extended, her dress flared out around her and then wrapped like a closing lily around her legs. With the grace of a swan, she spun back into him…

And, unbidden, she encircled his neck with her arm.

Galahad's breath caught.

His eyes flashed, and he reflexively brought her in close to him, his own arm around her waist. He could see nothing but her, gazing back up at him. Could *feel* nothing but her in his arms, and the heartbeat of the enveloping song.

As the crescendo built, they took one last waltzing turn around the center of the room, the ceiling sparkling like splintered suns, Meira's dress foaming and frothing like breakers upon the Metern beaches.

Finally, like a wistful sigh upon waking from a dream, the music diminished and quieted. Galahad slowed his steps and Meira did the same. And as the last few notes drifted through the air, they stopped completely.

For just an eternal moment, Galahad held Meira tight against his heart. Her head tilted back, and her grey eyes gazed up into his. Her left arm still encircled his neck. They hardly breathed, her nose not inches from his. He could feel her heart hammering against his chest.

Suddenly, without his consent, his gaze wandered all over her face—her flushed cheeks, her brilliant eyes, her delicate nose, the curls that framed her countenance…

Her soft mouth.

And suddenly, something deep inside him gave a terrifying, wrenching pulse.

The court burst into applause for the musicians.

Galahad's head jerked up, and he sucked in a breath. The illusion of silence all around him shattered.

"Galahad!" The king pushed through the crowd. He grinned at them as he strode out, and held out his hand toward Meira.

Gently, Meira pulled back from Galahad so she could take the king's hand and curtsey—but she kept hold of Galahad's left hand.

Galahad suddenly felt shaken, his legs weak. He didn't dare look at her, or at the king…

Meira interlaced their fingers, and squeezed.

A thrill shot up through Galahad's arm and lanced through his heart. He nearly staggered. He closed his eyes, fleetingly trying to remember the nearest door…

The king came round in front of him, and Galahad forced himself to open his eyes and look up.

"Incredible!" the king cried, gesturing to Meira. "This dress is…It's simply stunning! Tell me that magic is involved somehow—I know it is!"

Meira curtseyed again, and Galahad bowed to him.

"Just a touch, Your Majesty," he managed—but all at once, he couldn't recall any of the rest of what he'd planned to say to direct attention to Meira's dress, her hair, her dancing…

"Come!" the king slapped Galahad on the shoulder. "I have two people I want you to meet, and then we can all sit together at dinner!"

The king started off as the orchestra started to tune again. But Galahad couldn't move.

He felt Meira's grip on his hand change. It gentled, and she rubbed her thumb across the back of his.

He made himself look at her.

Her eyebrows drew together, and her grey eyes had flooded with blue. She searched straight through him, and then softly touched his wrist with the fingertips of her other hand.

He drew in a deep, shaking breath, and shook his head.

Still watching him, she tilted her own head toward the king, took half a step in that direction…

Galahad swallowed, and nodded. But she didn't let go of him.

Together, with Meira leading, they followed the king. The guests parted ways for them, and showered Meira with compliments—most of which Galahad did not hear. At last, they caught up to the king, who approached the tall, dark-haired, middle-aged woman with piercing black eyes, wearing elegant black trimmed in lace, her hair done up amongst a golden crown decorated with white shells. It was the lady the king had been dancing with. She looked directly at Galahad, then Meira—

And Galahad immediately bowed low. Meira followed suit.

"Mother, may I present Galahad Stormcrane and Lady Meira, of the Fortress of Maith," the king said, stepping up beside her. "Galahad; Meira —this is Anne, Queen of Mhuirlan."

"Queen Mother," the woman corrected gently, smiling at him. "Now that you are king."

The king laughed.

"I'm afraid I shan't get used to *that!"*

She patted his arm, then turned back to Galahad and Meira.

"The two of you make a beautiful pair," she said. "Thank you for honoring my son with your presence here tonight. He was delighted to see you come in. I am so sorry that my husband and my brother-in-law cannot share our joy."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Galahad said quietly. "We're sorry, also."

He sneaked a look at the king—but the young man only beamed at his mother.

Delighted…?

The queen mother then took a breath and drew herself up. "Dearest, I believe I'll go sit with Lady Ellington."

"Of course," the king nodded, leaned in and kissed her cheek. She gave him another smile, and then passed through the crowd, who gave way for her.

“Come!” the king abruptly took up Meira’s hand and tugged on her. She immediately followed him—

And her right hand pulled out of Galahad’s.

He mentally stumbled, half his body going cold.

The king drew Meira toward the back corner of the room and she trotted to keep up. Galahad set his teeth and followed. He wove between several courtiers, trying to glimpse whoever-it-was they would be meeting…

He slowed.

A lady stood beside a pillar, gazing at the orchestra. She wore purple as soft as evening, which draped in a simple, elegant fashion around her slender, shapely form. She had skin like moonlight, hair of spun gold, which was woven into a crown of curls upon her head, some tendrils raining down upon her bare, graceful shoulders. A heavenly face—young and fresh, with long lashes, soft features, and a rosy mouth. Diamonds twinkled upon her ears, and a rare water sapphire glittered at her throat, upon a nearly-invisible chain of Metern silver.

She turned her head, and striking blue eyes lifted to find Galahad—eyes bright as the summer sky, yet filled with the depth of a star-filled midnight.

Her beautiful mouth smiled, and her gaze laughed. Even without adornment, her radiance would outshine the full splendor of the heavens.

Galahad’s heart skipped a beat.

“My friends,” the king said, releasing Meira’s hand and coming around to stand beside the lady. “May I introduce you to my oldest comrade, Lady Beatrix Greigh of the castle of Arsa Coill.”

“Galahad Stormcrane!” Lady Beatrix said, her voice bright and musical. “I know that name almost as well as my own! You once helped rescue my father out of a mire in the Welhold Marshes, do you remember?”

Galahad frowned sharply at her.

“The Grey Knight,” Lady Beatrix prompted. “Eidrid the Halfelfin.”

“Oh. Yes,” Galahad managed. “Yes, I…I was only ten years old.”

“He is still grateful to you,” she said cheerfully, extending her hand. “He would be so happy that you and I have finally met—I cannot remember how many times he’s told me that story.”

Galahad hesitated, then reached out his hand and enfolded her fingers with his.

Great, ancient power, pure as sunlight, washed through his chest. His eyes misted, and he closed them…

Then, unable to do anything else, he bowed his head, and pressed her hand to his brow.

“The greatest honor is mine,” he said softly—and he spoke in high elvish. “To lay hold of the hand of one of the kinsmen of the Source.”

The lady laughed, and when he lifted his eyes, she was beaming happily down at him.

“How sweetly you speak my mother tongue, Curse-Breaker,” she said.

He looked at her a moment longer, then arose, and reluctantly let her hand slip from his.

“Lady Meira!” Lady Beatrix cried—and she turned a truly delighted look upon Meira, and held out her hand. “I have heard a great deal about you—the knights and James have told me that you’re their favorite new lady at court.”

Galahad blinked, facing her…

Meira had gone pale. She glanced back and forth between the smiling king and the new lady…

Then slowly extended her hand and grasped Lady Beatrix’s fingers.

Lady Beatrix immediately took up Meira’s hand in both of hers, then stepped nearer to her.

“I very much want to be your friend,” Lady Beatrix said earnestly, in a low, secretive tone. “My people and the Curse-Breakers have long been allies+, but I have never met a *woman* from Maith.” She leaned close to Meira’s face. “Your dancing was utterly lovely, and your dress is simply a dream.”

Meira offered a weak smile, and dipped her head. Lady Beatrix’s own smile glowed, as if she was pleased by the very sight of her, and released Meira’s hand.

“Beatrix has never been to Metern,” the king cut in. “And I’m already weary of ceremony and all these starchy clothes. We’re taking day trip out onto the moors tomorrow, just with the knights and their ladies.”

Then, the king stepped in, and wrapped his arm comfortably around Lady Beatrix’s waist. She melted back against him as if she fit there.

“Won’t you two come with us?” the king asked, raising his eyebrows.

Galahad stared, powerless to rip his eyes from them, or summon any speech.

“Oh, please come!” Lady Beatrix urged. “I mean—well, we certainly don’t wish to interrupt your important work,” she glanced up at the king. “But *if* you find yourselves at liberty, it would make us *so* happy to have you with us.”

Galahad cleared his throat.

“Of course,” he said, unable to summon much volume. “We’re at your service.”

“No, I am at yours, Stormcrane,” Lady Beatrix replied with a sincere smile, shaking her head. “I’ve never failed to remember that, had you not rescued my father, I would never have been born.”

“Can’t imagine that,” the prince murmured, pulling her closer. She looked up and beamed at him.

Galahad swallowed.

“Come!” the king said, turning to Meira and Galahad. “We’re going into the hall. We’ll snatch Lance and Tristan and Gawain; I’m already hungry.” And with an insistent wave, he urged them to follow him and Lady Beatrix through a nearby door. Easily, Lady Beatrix took his arm, and they strolled off like a matching set.

Both Galahad and Meira stood still as they departed. Galahad’s hands had gone cold, his chest hollow.

He heard Meira let out a low, trembling breath. He halfway turned and regarded her.

She looked white as the day he had first seen her, with no color in her lips. She stared fixedly at the doorway—but it was as though she couldn’t see anything.

He set his jaw, and held out his arm to her.

“Courage,” he murmured.

Her glance flicked to his, and a minute shudder ran through her body. But she lifted her hand, slipped it around his elbow, and silently walked with him after the king and lady, into the feasting hall.

Chapter Eighteen

As the morning sunlight cast a golden haze over the grasses, and a breeze rolled up the cliffs from the sea, Galahad and Meira rode out toward Perlkastel. Thondorfax rocked beneath them in an easy canter, occasionally tossing his head and snorting, his great hooves kicking up dust in their wake.

Galahad had not spoken this morning, and Meira had made no attempts to communicate. Little Emblyn had meekly tried to make conversation at breakfast, but soon lapsed into silence when Galahad wouldn't reply, and Meira couldn't look at her. Meira hardly ate anything. Galahad forced himself to finish his meal.

Meira now wore an elegant green day dress of light material and long, fitted sleeves, her hair braided and woven with ribbon. She sat in front of Galahad, staring absently straight ahead.

They passed through the shady wood, with its thousands of chirping and flittering birds, and out into the palace gardens. Once again, the perfume of roses filled the air, and the song of the fountains flooded the quiet.

Galahad looked up and spotted a group of horses out in front of the palace gate, some with riders. When he and Meira drew near, he recognized Sir Lancelot, Sir Gawain and Sir Tristan, along with Lady Hollis, and two other ladies he didn't know.

And there also sat the king, astride his white horse—and Lady Beatrix, riding side-saddle on her own sleek grey mare. The king wore a white linen shirt and black riding trousers, with no other adornment, looking like a young sailor out on his first voyage. Lady Beatrix wore a daffodil-yellow dress with flowing sleeves, and a straw hat pinned atop her piled curls. Ribbons cascaded down the back of her hat. As Galahad and Meira rode up, the knights shouted to them and lifted their hands.

"Hello, hello!" the king called, waving to them. "Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

"It is," Galahad answered, drawing Thondorfax to a halt.

“Lady Meira,” the king said. “May I present Lady Guinevere and Lady Isolde—and of course, you know Lady Hollis.”

“Hello, Meira!” little Lady Hollis hopped in the air and waved. She wore pink again, her hair done up in braids, and she also wore a hat. The other two women smiled politely at Meira. The first—Lady Guinevere—had soft red hair and freckles, bright blue eyes, and a sweet, pretty face. She wore dark green, and her own straw hat, and she sat on a black horse. Lady Isolde was stunning, with serious, penetrating dark eyes, deep blonde hair in a thick braid, and she wore a very broad-brimmed straw hat, and a sky-blue dress. She rode on a red mare.

Meira managed to nod to them, and Galahad could feel her try to smile. But his attention pulled from the ladies to the king, who had sidled his horse up next to Lady Beatrix’s, and the two of them had begun to discuss something with a great deal of animation.

“I’m glad to see you today.”

Galahad’s head came around to find Sir Tristan on a tall bay come up on their right. He smiled quietly at Meira, then nodded to Galahad.

“Yes, you as well,” Galahad answered.

“I did not find the time to tell you yesterday evening,” Tristan said. “What a good pair you make, for dancing.”

“Thank you,” Galahad said.

“All right!” the king called out. “We’re to ride out to the southern hills, to the White Cliffs, and have our picnic there.”

“I am *so* excited,” Lady Beatrix beamed, gathering up her reins.

“The servants will follow us?” Sir Lancelot asked.

“Yes, they’re still packing up,” the king answered. “But I’d like to get a start, and enjoy the scenery.”

“It truly is a perfect day for it,” Lady Guinevere agreed.

The king exchanged a brilliant smile with Lady Beatrix, then brought his horse’s head around and clicked to him. The horse trotted off, around the palace, and the other horses hurried after.

“Bea, come up beside me!” the prince waved to her.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” she laughed, and spurred her horse into a brief trot to ride next to him.

Thondorfax snorted and picked up his pace, falling in line right behind the king. Then, Sir Gawain and his sister drew up to their left on a dappled mount, and Gawain grinned over at Galahad.

“I don’t let the wee lass ride on her own yet,” he declared with mock pompousness—and Hollis scowled back at him.

“I’m quite old enough and you know it,” she said, jabbing him with her elbow. Instantly, he reached down and violently tickled her ribs, and she let out a deafening squeal. The good-natured horse just pricked his ears back, though his eyes went wide—but Thondorfax gave an irritated snort.

“*Ow*, all right—now I’m deaf,” Gawain pushed his free hand to his ear.

“Serves you right,” Hollis giggled, slapping his leg.

“Serves *you* right if all the horses had bolted,” Gawain shot back. “Don’t make such infernal noises!”

“Don’t *tickle* me, then!” she retorted.

Galahad barely glanced over at their ruckus. He stared ahead, at the king and Lady Beatrix, who rode in stride, and looked at each other just as much as they marveled at the glorious blue sky, and the surrounding land.

They all rode out through the sunshine, following a wide track over the high, gently-rolling hills. The scent of blooming heather followed them, and bees buzzed amongst the gorse.

The king leaned toward Lady Beatrix and said something that Galahad couldn’t hear, and she threw back her head and let out a surprised, ringing laugh. The sound echoed like music, thrilling Galahad’s blood, rippling across the grasses and sending the birds to flight.

Cold settled down in his bones, and he bit the inside of his cheek.

He glanced around and behind him. Gawain and Hollis still good-naturedly bickered beside them; Lancelot rode beside Lady Guinevere and seemed engaged in a deep, serious conversation in the native language of the kingdom of Maison; Tristan rode beside Isolde—the lady was talking to him pleasantly, and Tristan listened, seeming to be engaged by every aspect of her features.

Soon, the track inclined, and they began climbing up a rather steep hill. The breezes picked up, and the sweet grasses thickened. At last, Galahad spotted an ancient, tumbling cairn surrounded by some scrub trees. The king led the party up to the broad crest of the green hill, pulled his horse to a stop and dismounted, then came around and helped Lady Beatrix down.

“Oh, what a splendid view!” Beatrix exclaimed breathlessly, holding onto the king’s arm. “You can see all the way to the sea, and beyond—I daresay you can see the Anhaga Moors from here!”

“Yes, you can,” the king replied, pointing. “That darker portion, across the channel, far into the hills—that’s the moors.”

Galahad released Meira and slipped off the back of Thondorfax, then came around to help her down.

She didn’t look at him. She only stared at Lady Beatrix and the king’s backs, her eyebrows drawn tight together.

“Meira,” Galahad murmured.

She didn’t stir.

“Meira,” he said again, touching her hip. “Come down.”

Her lip twitched, and a small shudder ran through her. She fleetingly glanced at him, then leaned so he could catch her. He set her down, and she lowered her head. Thondorfax brought his head around and nickered at her, but she didn’t acknowledge him.

Galahad’s jaw tightened. He didn’t say anything.

Behind them, everyone else was dismounting and enthusiastically commenting on the spectacular view, and pointing to which portions of the island they recognized. Galahad held out his arm to Meira. Listlessly, she took it, and he led her between the other horses to stand beside the king.

Galahad feigned to study the scenery, instead listening to the king and Lady Beatrix’s conversation.

“You remember the cairn near Arsa, don’t you James?” Beatrix asked him. “Where father took us riding, and we—”

“Yes, of course,” the king interrupted, laughing. “When we rode out, and then it rained on us and you got soaked and ruined your new hat—”

“Ugh, I was *furious*,” she exclaimed, then laughed with him. “It was my favorite hat!”

“At the moment,” he corrected playfully.

“Yes, at the moment,” she muttered back.

Meira swayed.

Galahad felt her lean heavily against this side. He tore his attention from the king and grabbed hold of her. She looked icy pale. Discreetly, he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“Should we go?”

She swallowed, her eyes closing, but shook her head.

“Come here,” he said. “Let’s sit in the shade.”

He guided her away from the others to the shadow of the cairn, and helped her ease down on the grass. He sat down beside her, watching her

carefully. She just stared out at the horizon. But before he could ask her again, a shout went up from the others.

Galahad sat up to see a party of servants bearing baskets and bags ride up the hill. In no time, they had spread out huge white blankets and staked white umbrellas, and then laid out a great deal of food. Galahad helped Meira to her feet and together they approached the nearest umbrella and sat down.

“Galahad, come here!” the king beckoned to him, and Galahad realized that the other men were reclining in the sun, whilst the women sat in the shade of the umbrellas.

“It’s a tradition on Metern,” Lancelot declared. “Men and women sit apart for picnics—and shout to each other.”

Everyone else laughed. Meira just stiffened.

Galahad took a deep breath, glanced at her, then got up and picked his way between the platters to sit cross-legged next to Lancelot. No sooner had he done this than Lady Beatrix moved, and quietly settled next to Meira.

“Meira, dear—are you quite all right?” Beatrix asked her softly, her brow furrowing.

Meira’s head came up, she looked at the other woman, then quickly nodded.

“Perhaps the heat is too much,” Isolde wondered, her grave eyes solemnly inquiring.

“She needs a cool drink and something to eat,” Guinevere decided. “You sit there, Lady Meira, we shall serve you.”

“Yes, we shall!” Lady Hollis agreed. And without another word, the ladies briskly assembled a plate of sandwiches, fruit and cheeses for Meira, as well as a glass of lemonade, discussing which foods would keep her coolest.

“Here—you eat, don’t wait for us,” Beatrix said, holding the plate out to her.

Meira hesitated with wide eyes—and Galahad realized she was waiting for silverware.

“Oh!” Lady Beatrix suddenly said. “No—that’s the beauty of picnics! You don’t need anything else! We’ll all eat with our fingers.” And she gave Meira a cheeky grin—one that Meira couldn’t help but try to return.

Then, as the women chatted about the wind and the birds, and the knights and the king discussed their horses, everyone loaded his plate and filled his glass and began to eat. Galahad kept comment to himself, but remained attentive to everything everyone said, especially the king—meeting his eyes and showing that he was listening, even if he made no remark. Several times, he shot glances across the way to Meira. She dutifully ate her food, one piece at a time, and was clearly trying to attend to the conversation of the other ladies. They sometimes looked at her, but since she couldn't say anything…

Finally, when the king had eaten two plates full, he sat up and dusted off his hands.

"Henry, bring me my instrument, please!" he called. One of the servants pulled a stylish, pale lute from a velvet bag and brought it over to the king.

"Thank you!" the king said as he took it, and started tuning. The strings of the instrument rang like ancient faery song, and Galahad could instantly tell that the king could play well—his fingers danced across the instrument as if it was an extension of himself.

"Are you going to sing to us, Your Majesty?" Lady Beatrix teased.

"I'm going to sing to *someone*," he corrected. "You must guess who."

"Oh, indeed?" she said, suppressing a smile and raising her eyebrows. "Do go on, then."

The king tuned one more time…

And Galahad's gaze drifted to Meira.

She stared across at the king, her fair brow knotted, her cheeks pale.

As if silently pleading…

The king set his instrument, and played a courtly, lilting introduction. Then, he took a breath, lifted his head, and began to sing.

"Did you not hear my lady
Go down the garden singing
Blackbird and thrush were silent
To hear the alleys ringing

Oh, saw you not my lady
Out in the garden there?
Shaming the rose and lily

For she is twice as fair…”

The prince sang much more gently than he had when they had ridden out to the Ruined Mount. Now, his tones rang with purity and strength, and the clear warmth of a spring morning.

And he never looked anywhere but at Lady Beatrix.

“Though I am nothing to her
Though she must rarely look at me
And though I could never woo her
I love her till I die!”

Meira’s gaze instantly flew to Beatrix.

But Beatrix didn’t notice. She saw no one else. She just smiled gently back at the king, her eyes alight.

And the king’s gaze softened, intensified. As if he had forgotten he was amongst company. His tone became sweetly plaintive and earnest.

“Surely you heard my lady
Go down the garden singing
Silencing all the songbirds
And setting the alleys ringing

But surely you see my lady
Out in the garden there
Rivaling the glittering sunshine
With a glory of golden hair!”

The king finished out his tune on his lute, then lifted his hand from the strings. Everyone burst into applause. Galahad couldn’t bring himself to move—and Meira…

She sat frozen, hardly breathing, still staring brokenly at the king.

“All right then,” Lady Guinevere said over the clapping. “He’s obviously singing about *Isolde*.”

“Of course!” the king laughed. “Who else?” And he winked at Isolde. Beatrix laughed too, still clapping.

“Come, *you* must sing us something,” Lancelot gestured to Beatrix.

“Who, me?” she pointed to herself, surprised.

“Yes, all the ladies,” Tristan added. “All of you, sing something.”

“Oh, very well—they’ve been good enough to *feed* us, we ought to give them some entertainment,” Beatrix muttered wryly, and the other ladies exchanged saucy looks with her. Galahad saw Meira swallow, and rip her attention away from the king.

“What shall we sing?” Hollis asked.

“We all know Lilies of the Valley, do we not?” Guinevere asked.

“I do!” Hollis announced.

“I do,” Beatrix said. “Do you, Isolde?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “You start, Bea.”

“All right, ahem…” Beatrix sat up straight, took a deep breath…

“White coral bells upon a slender stalk
Lilies of the valley line my garden walk
Oh, don’t you wish that you could hear them ring?
That will happen only when the fairies sing!”

Beatrix’s silvery, ethereal voice soared over the fields, quieting all the birds—effortless as breathing. Galahad felt the knights and the king instantly enrapture—leaning in, their lips parting. He felt his own heart stir. Beatrix leaned her golden head back and brightly sang to the clouds, as if uttering the language of the sky.

She started the chorus again, and then when, she finished the word “stalk,” Isolde began, and when *she* sang “stalk,” Guinevere came in, and then Lady Hollis. The other ladies had pleasant, ringing voices, and the combined round danced across the hillside. In half a moment of fancy, Galahad knew that, if there *had* been any lilies of the valley nearby...

He suddenly saw Meira.

And he went absolutely still.

Meira’s pale face turned toward the women, and she watched Beatrix. As if in a trance. She was mouthing the words to the song.

And tears were trailing slowly down her cheeks, dripping from her chin.

A vivid sting, like the barbs of a poisoned arrow, shafted through the center of Galahad’s heart.

Instantly—as if something invisible and dark had rippled across her—Lady Beatrix twitched, and stopped singing.

Galahad blinked.

Beatrix's eyes flashed to his. They went wide.

Then, she twisted around and saw Meira.

"Stop!" she suddenly cried, waving off the other women. "Stop, stop it at once."

The ladies halted mid-word, frowning.

"What?" Lady Hollis yelped.

"Don't you see how cruel we're being?" Beatrix exclaimed, facing Meira. "James told me that your voice had been taken by a witch—I'm so *stupid*, I forgot." Beatrix squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her fingers to her temples for an instant, before earnestly looking to Meira and grasping her hand in both of hers. "You must think us so unkind. I just *know* you had a beautiful voice before this happened; I can tell simply by looking at you." She lowered her head and her voice, even as Meira gazed helplessly back at her.

"We shan't sing any more," Beatrix vowed. "Not if it gives you pain."

Meira smiled shakily, more tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Oh, dear…Dear, dear," Beatrix stretched out an imploring hand to the king. "James, give me your handkerchief!"

The king immediately reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out an embroidered handkerchief, got up and held it out to Beatrix. She snatched it and, without preamble, dried Meira's tears.

"You mustn't cry; really, you mustn't," Beatrix insisted—but Galahad could hear her voice trembling, as if she were on the verge of tears herself. "It's such a lovely day, please don't let us spoil it for you, my friend. Please."

Galahad couldn't move. He just sat there, stunned to his core as he watched Beatrix's gentle fingers wipe away all of Meira's tears, and then press the king's handkerchief into her hands.

"Will you forgive me?" Beatrix whispered.

Shocked, Meira stared at her.

Galahad's mouth opened, but nothing coherent even formed in his mind.

Then, Meira's brow twisted, and she nodded.

And Beatrix threw her arms around her neck, and hugged her.

"Well, shall we walk instead?" Sir Gawain spoke up. "Can we walk around the cairn?"

Beatrix backed up from Meira and swiped at her own eyes, then sniffed and made herself sit up straight.

“Yes! Yes, we should all like that, I think.” And she got up, and held her hand down to Meira. Meira took it, clutching the handkerchief to her heart, and stood up. The knights climbed to their feet as well. Galahad arose and crossed the blanket.

“Would you like to hold onto me?” he asked Meira quietly.

“Yes, hold onto him,” Beatrix said, still teary, but chuckling. “And I’ll hold onto James—and hopefully none of us will fall down this hill!” And she strode over to the king, wrapped her arm around his, and pressed her face to his shoulder for a moment. And he kissed the top of her head.

The knights found their ladies, and together the group started out across the grass, even as the wind picked up.

Galahad stood there with Meira on his arm, watching all of them. Then, without his saying anything, they trailed after the group.

As they walked, the king, with great animation, told the exciting history of this cairn: how it used to be a lookout for the entire island, and a now-legendary watchman at midnight saved the life of the king by spotting an oncoming fleet of pirates before the scoundrels made landfall.

The wind cooled. Galahad frowned and glanced up at the sky.

Low clouds rolled over the sun, darkening the hills.

He pulled Meira with him, and they rounded the cairn to step up next to the horses. He felt Meira finally lift her head, and gaze out across the sea where he was looking.

“I don’t like the look of the sky,” he said to her. She shook her head once—and a gust took up her skirt and hair, and Galahad’s cape, and thrashed them.

“Your Majesty,” Galahad looked over his shoulder and called to him. “Take a look at the horizon.”

The king stopped what he was saying and drew an intently-frowning Beatrix up next to them. The king and Beatrix peered out to sea…

Where the thick clouds had dipped down onto the horizon, and turned an ugly, greenish grey.

“Oh, I don’t like that,” the king stated, and shook his head. “We must away home.”

“Yes, I agree,” Beatrix said, grabbing her skirt and hiking it up. “Come, quickly.”

“What, a storm?” Gawain called.

“Yes, look at that!” Lancelot pointed. “We don’t have much time—it will be here in half an hour.”

“You’ll all come back to Perlkastel,” the king said. “We’ll all be safe there, and it isn’t far.”

“Pardon me, Your Majesty, but Euryor House is the same distance,” Galahad cut in, even as the wind whipped his hair. “We’ll be off there.”

“But—Are you sure?” Beatrix searched them, looking urgently at Meira.

“Yes, we’ll be fine if we leave now,” Galahad said. The next moment, Thondorfax crossed to him, and tossed his bridle. Galahad helped Meira up into the saddle, then climbed up after her.

“Thank you for the picnic,” Galahad said, looking to all of them as he settled. The knights and ladies watched him with concern—and especially so the king and Beatrix. Galahad wrapped his arm around Meira and took up the reins, then regarded the king gravely.

“Ride safely. Take care of them.”

The king set his jaw, and nodded solemnly back to him.

“You have my word.”

Distant thunder rolled out over the face of the sea. A chill washed down through Galahad’s body, and he narrowed his eyes at the darkening waters. And even as he looked, green lightning darted from the clouds to the ocean.

“Hurry,” he barked.

The others dashed to their horses, shouting to the servants. With one last look across the company, Galahad turned Thondorfax and urged him into a gallop—and they raced down the hill along the wide lane, even as rain began to fly.

Chapter Nineteen

Mere minutes after their departure, the heavens broke open and rain poured. Wind whipped across the moors and fog rolled in, obscuring the valleys and hiding the horizon. The roads turned to black mud, and Thondorfax's feet kicked it up all over his riders. Galahad freed his hand from around Meira and laboriously dragged his cape around to try to shield her—she took hold of it and tugged it over her dress, but didn't try to hide her face from the lash of the rain. Gusts kept blowing Galahad's hood off, and soon his hair was soaked. Icy water ran down his neck and doused his shirt beneath his cape, and his trousers instantly became sodden. Rain drenched Meira's skirts and mud splattered her hems, but the water rolled down her cheeks and her hair like silver pearls. She stared, unseeing, straight ahead of them.

They plunged through the mist and the sheets of rain, Thondorfax shaking the rainwater out of his face with irritated snorts. Thunder crackled overhead, and water coursed in rivers down the road. Finally, they reached a familiar bend in the road, and splashed down the hill toward Euryor House. Galahad peered through the storm, but none of the lights shone in the windows, and the chimney didn't smoke.

They rode through the flooded yard, sloshing through the mud, and ducked into the dark barn. Thondorfax immediately shook out his mane, splattering Galahad's face further. Galahad tugged his cape off Meira and stiffly pushed himself off the back of the horse. He landed with a grunt, wincing, then turned to find her climbing down herself. He caught her waist with one hand when she was already halfway down, and he jerked her wet skirt out of the way of her feet. She hopped off and landed soundlessly in the straw. Quickly, Galahad stripped the saddle, blanket and bridle off Thondorfax, then turned to glance at Meira. She nodded to him. Together, they started toward the door.

He lifted his cape over her head like an umbrella, pulled on his own hood, and together they ducked down and dashed back out into the yard.

Their feet sank into three inches of dirty water. Meira grabbed her skirt in both hands and hiked it up to her knees, to avoid slogging through the wet cloth. They hopped up on the stoop, Galahad reached around her and pushed the door open, and together they stumbled, panting and dripping, into the dim entryway. Galahad slammed the door behind him, then shoved his hair out of his face with his gloved hands. His soaking cape tangled around his left arm. He reached up to work the latch at his throat, but his gloves were too thick.

Meira tiredly pushed strands of hair out of her face with both hands, and stepped up to him. Without looking at him, she reached up to his throat.

Galahad stopped, and slowly lowered his hand, watching her.

She unfastened the cape and tugged it loose from around his shoulders and arm. Silent, he moved with it, and the heavy garment fell free. Meira pulled it down in front of her, carefully fastening the clasp again. She leaned around him, brushing his chest with her shoulder, and hung the cape on the wall hook. And when she turned her head toward him, she glanced wearily up into his face—so near that he could see the flecks of sapphire in her eyes.

She let out a deep sigh, lifted a pale hand to his cheek, and absently wiped a smear of mud off his cheekbone. Her fingertips were cold, her touch soft. She glanced into his eyes for another instant, and the trace of a weak smile crossed her mouth.

Galahad drew in a low, cautious breath.

She lowered her head, and her fingertips drifted down to his jaw before resting briefly on his collar. Then, she turned toward the staircase, lifted her dragging skirts, and climbed the stairs. Galahad wordlessly watched her go, still feeling the ghost of her hand against his face.

Thunder boomed as Galahad stoked the fire in the library, replaced the poker, then hurried to one of the windows to secure the latch. Rain poured so thickly that he couldn’t see anything through the panes except a colorless blur of light and dark. He drew back and snapped the curtains shut.

He had changed into dry clothes, deciding to wait until the rain let up before going back out to feed Thondorfax—but so far, the storm had only risen.

The back kitchen door bashed open. Galahad whirled around, then strode through the parlor and dining room—

To find Little Emblyn staggering in, heaving the door shut behind her.

"Where on earth were you?" he demanded.

"Sorry, sir!" she gasped, looking like a drowned mouse, her wet hair like ragged drapes all around her face, her cap almost covering her eyes. "I was having tea with Mrs. Glennon when the storm came up—we thought I might wait to come back when it stopped raining, but it hasn't stopped, so I made a run for it!"

"Go upstairs and change, then sit by the fire," Galahad ordered, gesturing past him to the steps. "We can't have any of us catching cold."

"Yes, sir," she sputtered, swiping water out of her face…

But she stayed where she was. And she looked at him with something like a flicker of fear in her eyes. Galahad swallowed, going cold again. He waited.

"The Glennons say that Lady Beatrix is already everyone's favorite," Little Emblyn whispered. "That she's so beautiful, and kind and sweet, and all the knights are half in love with her. And the king…" She halted, the skin around her eyes tightening. "That the king quite prefers her to every other maiden. Is it…Is it true?"

Galahad shifted, glancing down. He said nothing.

"Oh, no," Little Emblyn breathed. He looked at her, and her eyebrows drew together. Without saying anything else, she hurried across the kitchen floor, leaving muddy footprints in her wake. Galahad set his hands on his hips and considered her mess, biting the inside of his cheek…

"Hullo, Miss!" Little Emblyn called into the stairwell—a little too cheerfully. "Sorry about your picnic—did it rain on you?"

Galahad hung his head, then pressed his fingers to his eyes. Skirts rustled in the doorway, and he lifted his face to see Meira standing there, her own gaze tracing Little Emblyn's wet footprints. She wore a simple brown dress with a belt, her hair braided.

"Do you need something to eat?" Galahad asked quietly.

Meira shrugged, stepping over the water to cross to the back kitchen window. The dim light and the coursing water sent strange reflections over

her features. She wrapped her arms around herself, frowning faintly as she watched the raindrops slither down the panes.

Galahad's mouth opened—but a deep pain somewhere inside him stopped him. He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and asked it anyway.

"Do you despair of the king?"

Meira lifted her eyebrows. For a long moment, she did nothing else.

Then, at last, she shook her head.

Galahad sighed, studying the mud on the floor again.

"Well, there's nothing more to do today," he said. "Come with me—we'll make certain all the windows are properly shut. I don't want the house to flood."

Meira glanced over at him, as if coming out of a deep thought, then nodded. Together, they left the kitchen and headed upstairs.

That afternoon, Galahad forced himself to go back out into the rain to take care of Thondorfax. When he burst back into the house, he was just as drenched as the first time, so he had to go upstairs and perform a snap spell on his first set of clothes, to dry them more quickly, and then donned them.

After that, he came downstairs and found Little Emblyn and Meira busily working in the kitchen. He slowed his steps, and hung back in the dining room. Meira stood with her back to him, facing the range, stirring meat in a pot. Little Emblyn cut carrots and onions on the countertop as she halfway faced Meira, and hummed to herself in time with the thud of the knife against the board.

Galahad quietly stepped back into the parlor and picked up a wooden chair, brought it back into the dining room and set it at the head of the table across the room from the kitchen door, facing it. Slowly, he sat down and leaned back, listening to Little Emblyn's absent humming, and the clank of wooden spoon against metal pot.

He shifted forward, stuck his hand in his pocket, and, out of habit, pulled out the contents one by one. They clinked against the wood as he carefully set them on the table. Then, he let a handful of coins slip from his fingers and jingle onto the tabletop.

Meira turned at the sound. Then, she set the spoon aside and ventured into the dining room. He didn't look up at her. He just picked up the largest

coin, set it on its edge and twirled it. It spun, flashing the lamplight back, then wobbled and fell over with a little crash.

Meira laughed softly, drawing even closer. She eased down on the bench to his right, watching in fascination as he picked up another coin and twirled it, too. When it finally fell over, Galahad picked up the first object he'd lifted out: a small brass box with a chain.

"This was my grandfather's compass," he said, holding it up. He lifted the lid, and set the small metal spindle against the edge so the lid would prop open. Meira leaned forward, peering down into the box to see the gently wobbling circle marked with delicate lines and a dark, inky N.

"My mother's father was a traveling merchant," Galahad continued softly, handing it to Meira. She took it gingerly into her palm, tilting her head as she studied it.

"He traveled all over Edel, carrying pearls from Nerrinton to the jewelry makers in Goldreich," Galahad said. "And ebony beads from the Black Western Woods to the Eorna Valley. My mother said he even brought Spegel glass for the windows at the Halls of Healing. And this compass never left him, in all those years. Look, you can see where his thumb made an imprint, there." Galahad pointed to the side of the compass. Meira turned it and saw, then met his eyes and smiled. Then, she gently set it down on the table, shut the lid, and pointed to the coins.

"This is just my passage money," he said, picking up a coin and passing it to her. "Enough for one week at an inn, and food along the way."

Meira turned the coin over and over in her fingers, marveling at the printed face on one side and the decorative E on the other. Soon, she set that one down and picked up another—one bearing thistles and a coat of arms. Then another, with a bird and a Trinity knot. Finally, though, her attention drifted down to the one object still lying anonymously on the table, and her hands went still.

"My mother gave this to me," Galahad said, picking it up. The silver chain dangled over his fingers, and the smooth onyx stone glistened beneath an elegant working of a silver dragon on the wing. He ran his thumb across the dragon, an ache inside his chest.

"It doesn't have any magic in it," he said—and lifted his eyes to Meira. "Except my memories of her."

The flamelight warmed Meira's features as she smiled again. Slowly, he held the necklace out to her. She took it from him, their fingers brushing,

and held it in her palm.

"What about *your* mother?" Galahad asked.

She glanced at him, and sorrow shadowed her face. She shook her head.

"She died?"

Meira drew in a shaking breath, and nodded.

"Long ago?" he asked softly. She nodded again.

"What about your father? Strom?" Galahad wondered.

Meira's expression shrugged as she draped the chain over her hands, and she lifted one shoulder.

"Do you not ever see him?" he supposed. She shook her head, then waved out in front of her, implying a great distance.

"He's out to sea," Galahad realized. Then he hesitated, his brow furrowing. "Have you been…Have you been alone all this time?"

Meira swallowed, watching her hands as she turned the necklace over. Her lower lip trembled—and when she looked at him, her eyes shone. Galahad held her gaze for as long as he could, but then he couldn't bear it.

Meira cleared her throat, and picked up the compass. Galahad frowned, wondering what she was doing…

She held the necklace and compass out to him. He lifted both his hands, palms up…

She placed one in each hand, moved her thumbs, and closed Galahad's fingers over the compass and the necklace. She gazed at him searchingly, holding his hands there...

"Yes," he murmured. "I miss mine, too."

Meira released a long, shuddering sigh, and nodded. Finally, she let her hands slip down from his. She sat back, her wistful attention falling on the coins again. She picked one up, set it on its edge…

And spun it.

She stood up and trailed back into the kitchen to help Little Emblyn—and the coin didn't wobble and fall until she'd already started to stir the meat again.

Rumblings of thunder rolled above the roof, and rain pounded the house, showering the walls as the fierce wind beat against the windows. Galahad sat in the darkened library on one end of the couch, his feet

stretched out toward the crackling fire. Only one lamp burned, on the table by his left arm, and he held a small book to its light. His shoulders ached, but warmth swelled out from the hearth and soaked into his bones.

Scraw roosted on the edge of the mantelpiece, occasionally shifting his weight and fluffing his feathers. The fire spat a shower of sparks, and a log thudded into the embers. The scent of smoldering pine filled the room.

Lightning flashed against the curtains. The next second, a loud *crack* of thunder clapped right through the beams of the house. The ensuing rumble cascaded out over the land like giants hurling stones.

Movement to his left.

His head came up, and he saw Meira standing in the doorway.

He didn't say anything. She hesitated for half a second, then stepped quietly inside. She rounded the couch and absently picked up a red throw pillow off the armchair. She paused in front of the fire, wrapping her arms around the pillow and holding it to her chest, watching the swaying dance of the flames. Galahad kept his book open, but studied the lines of her silhouette.

She took a deep breath, and sighed. Lightning flickered, and the thunder growled again.

She turned around, her face downcast, stepped up to the couch and set the pillow down next to him. Then, she climbed onto the couch and lay down on her side, facing the fire. She nuzzled her head onto the pillow, drew her knees up, curled her arms against herself—and sighed again.

Galahad's eyebrows drew together. Her head lay just an inch from the side of his leg. As he watched, she blinked drowsily…

And in a few minutes, her long-lashed eyes had drifted shut, and she breathed deeply. Warm firelight drifted over her features, and gave a sunset luster to her hair. And as the tension in her frame eased, Galahad saw a change come over her face. Something about her softened…vanished…

And he realized that he'd just seen a crushing grief lift off of her as she faded into sleep.

A grief she had carried with her since the moment he first saw her.

His brow tightened to pain, and he tilted his head, freeing his right hand from his book. Very softly, he touched her temple, then slowly traced a wave in her hair, guiding a strand back behind her ear. He rested his fingertips there, his breathing shallowing to nothing. Then, he silently

closed his book, lowered it onto his lap, and gently laid his hand protectively across the side of her warm, soft throat. Closing his eyes, the firelight blurring against his lids, he let warmth from his hand spread down into her skin, into the very pulse of her veins. He ran his thumb back and forth, back and forth, across the edge of her jaw, feeling her heartbeat against his fingertips.

"*Dóchas,*" he mouthed, just once—and a light glowed in his mind, traveled down through his chest, into his arm, through his palm, and into her. And as the storm beat against the walls and lightning burned through the clouds, only silence and warmth reigned in that little library, enshielded by Galahad's simple spell.

Chapter Twenty

Galahad stood with his eyes closed, drawing deep breaths of the rich, moist air; letting the morning sun sink through him. The calm wind rustled his clothes and hair, murmuring through the grasses and flowers.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, frowning against the brilliance, and gazed out over the cliffside. The storm had cleared the sky, leaving behind a striking blue as far as the eye could see. The gentle sea had taken on an even deeper, more splendid hue, and the sand of the beaches shone white as pearl. The rain had enlivened the emerald of the grasses, and the flowers dancing in the breezes looked like bundles of pink cotton. The fishermen had launched their boats into the channel, and their white sails dotted the sapphire expanse. Everything smelled deliciously-fresh, as if the wind from the storm had carried the very air of elven lands across the seas to Edel.

A sound.

Galahad blinked, coming back to himself, and halfway turned his head.

It sounded like someone singing. Close by, just over the hill.

A sweet, sweeping, waltzing sound. He recognized the tune.

But it was *not* Little Emblyn.

Coming about, Galahad started toward it, careful to keep his footsteps quiet. He approached the height of the hill and neared a copse of tall heather bushes. He paused behind the bush, leaning around just enough to see…

Meira.

An electric shock shot through Galahad's frame.

Her mouth was moving—*a voice* issued forth.

A beautiful, resonant, *heavenly* voice that complemented the wind and the grasses in a harmonious trio. In a green dress with pink trim, Meira wandered absently over the hillside, one hand filled with flowers swaying by her side, and more flowers tucked into her braid like a crown. She gazed up into the sky, stepping in slow time with her enchanting, *impossible* song.

"Lavender's blue, dilly dilly, lavender's green
When you are king, dilly dilly, I shall be queen

Who told you so, dilly dilly, who told you so?
Twas my own heart, dilly dilly, that told me so!"

A glassy, bewildered, joyous pain shattered inside Galahad's chest—he couldn't tear his eyes from her, and his breathing locked in his ribs. Meira's voice seemed to ring through the marrow of his bones, filling his mind with blinding light and color.

"Call up your men, dilly dilly, set them to work
Some to the plough, dilly dilly, some to the fork
Some to make hay, dilly dilly, some to cut corn
Whilst you and I, dilly dilly, keep ourselves warm."

Then, she girlishly twirled, and started to waltz over the high meadow with the grace of a nymph. The wind swirled around her, tossing her curls and ruffling her skirts. Her bare feet danced over the flowers, never crushing them, and birds jubilantly added a descant accompaniment.

"Lavender's green, dilly dilly, lavender's blue
If you love me, dilly dilly, I will love you
Let the birds sing, dilly dilly, and the lambs play
We shall be safe, dilly dilly, out of harm's way."

A jingling noise suddenly interrupted her.

Galahad straightened. Meira stopped mid-step, swinging around to search out the source. In a moment, a herd of sheep, led by one with a jangling bell, lumbered over the edge of the hill, and an old shepherd with his black-and-white dog whistled along behind.

"Good morning, Miss!" he called, tipping his hat. "I heard you singing! Lovely voice!"

She nodded to him, gripping her flowers.

"Don't stop on our account," the shepherd laughed as the sheep and the dogs passed her. "We get little enough in the way of music out here in the hills!" He laughed, and swung his walking cane as they continued on down the way.

Meira turned, watching them go, pressing the flowers to her breast. Her eyebrows drew together, but she braced herself…

Took a deep breath, formed the first word of the song—

No sound came out.

She winced, shut her eyes, took another breath, and tried again.

Nothing.

Slowly, Meira sank down onto the grass and pulled her knees up to her chest, letting the bouquet hang loose from her fingers.

Galahad's eyes stung. A tear spilled down his cheek, scalding his skin. He shut his eyes.

The nature of the curse.

If she knew someone could hear her, she couldn't sing or speak.

Silencing her completely.

Robbing her of the *one thing* about her that was certain to make King James fall in love with her.

He bowed his head, dashing the tear away, and turned away. Letting out a low, grinding moan, he straightened, and forcibly strode back down the hill toward the cliffs, and the lane that led to Euryor House.

Galahad spent the rest of the morning mucking out Thondorfax's stall, cleaning the horse's hooves and brushing him, polishing the saddle; and then he went in the house, upstairs, and performed basic laundry spells on his clothes from yesterday, knocking the caked mud loose and folding it all back into his bag. He then put new waterproofing on his boots and scrubbed that in for a good half hour.

After he'd put the boots back on and tidied up, he came downstairs to find Meira's bouquet in a wooden vase on the dining room table. His footsteps stalled and he lingered there, caught by the sight of the pastel blooms standing in a ray of sunlight.

Voices reached him. Several voices.

He glanced through the kitchen and saw the back door hanging open to the garden. And out there, he could distinguish the voices of Little Emblyn, and Mr. and Mrs. Glennon. He strode through, out into the early afternoon warmth.

He found them there, along with Meira, sitting on a frayed quilt on a patch of lawn by the cabbages, eating sandwiches and drinking raspberry cordial.

“Sir, come eat!” Little Emblyn called, waving a sandwich. “We’ve made enough for you.”

“Begging your pardon for taking liberties, sir,” Ben Glennon said, stiffly rising to his feet.

“No liberty taken at all,” Galahad shook his head. “This is your home, not mine. I’m only a guest here.”

“That’s quite kind of ye, sir,” Ben Glennon smiled. “Won’t you eat with us?”

Galahad nodded, came around and found a place beside Meira, and sat down. Meira caught his eye, and smiled at him. He held her gaze for a moment, then gave her a quiet smile in return, so only she could see. Mrs. Glennon, laughing and remarking on the storm last night and the fine weather today, heaped food on a plate, then passed it to him. He accepted it with thanks, and started to eat.

Hooves upon the road.

Galahad put down his sandwich, climbed to his feet, and peered over the hedge, even as everyone else stopped talking and strained to listen.

“Goodness, he’s coming at quite a clip!” Mrs. Glennon remarked.

Galahad dusted off his hands and stepped closer to the wall, which he could just see over. He found a pile of stones in the corner and hopped up on them, and soon mounted the wall. Now that he stood at least twelve feet high, he could glimpse the rider cantering toward them down the lane. A white horse, and a rider with scarlet livery and a plumed hat.

“He’s from the palace,” Galahad said.

“The palace!” Little Emblyn gasped, and quickly got up—and so did Meira.

“Good day to you, sir!” the messenger called as he rode into the muddy yard.

“I hope your horse didn’t get stuck or slip on the way here,” Galahad remarked.

The messenger laughed—and now Galahad could see his white horse and his uniform liberally splattered with mud.

“I’ve come to issue an invitation,” the messenger said, digging in his satchel and pulling out an envelope. He eyed it for a moment before nodding. “Yes, this is yours.” He leaned out and passed it to Galahad.

“Thank you,” he said, taking it in both hands. “Do you need anything to drink?”

“Thank you so much, but I cannot stay,” the messenger shook his head. “I’ve a few of these to deliver, and it is short notice!”

“Good day, then,” Galahad said. The messenger saluted him, wheeled his horse around, and rode back out of the yard, throwing mud as he went. Galahad turned around, still standing on the wall, and studied the envelope.

“What is it?” Mrs. Glennon cried.

“It’s from the king. Personally,” Galahad answered as he broke it, and opened the paper.

“What does it say?” Little Emblyn bounced up and down. But Galahad didn’t answer until he’d read it three times to himself. He then glanced up at Meira—who gripped her hands tightly together, her brow knotted.

“It says,” Galahad began. *“‘Galahad and Lady Meira—I’m putting together a dinner party for this evening, with just a few friends, and would be so greatly honored if you would come. I am still distressed that our picnic ended so ruinously, and I fear I was neglectful, especially to you, my lady—which causes me great pain. I felt your silence, Galahad, and Meira, I witnessed your tears. Nothing has distressed me more in a great while. I have the greatest desire for your continued friendship, and wish to make amends. Please come tonight, at six o’clock. Do not concern yourself with presentation or ornamentation—it will be a casual gathering of friends around a small table, talking freely and enjoying each other’s company. I will send round a messenger again at three o’clock to retrieve your reply. Ever your faithful servant: James.’”*

“Oh…What a goodly king he is,” Mrs. Glennon sighed. “Thank heaven we have him for our sovereign—how lucky we are.”

“Indeed,” Ben Glennon nodded sincerely. “One of the finest kings in Edel, I would imagine.”

“You would be right,” Galahad acknowledged quietly, his gaze falling on Meira again. She simply stood there, and bit her lip. Galahad folded the paper, then tilted his head.

“Do you wish to go?” he asked.

Meira took a deep, shaking breath.

“Oh, you must go!” Little Emblyn gripped her arm, giving her a severe look. “You simply *must.*”

Meira considered her, then looked back up to Galahad. He just waited.

At last, she nodded.

Galahad put the invitation in his pocket and hopped down from the wall.

“Very well. There’s time enough to get ready later.” And he sat down by his plate, and began to eat. Little Emblyn fell back to her knees and picked up her sandwich again, and Meira settled down beside Galahad—but her gaze had gone distant again.

Galahad said no more, just absently listened to the Glennons and Little Emblyn discuss the storm, its sudden appearance—and why it had vanished so completely at just around midnight.

The guards pulled open a set of wooden double doors, and with a deep breath, Galahad and Meira stepped into the room beyond. It was a cozy library room, with scarlet carpets and a brightly-burning brass chandelier. In the center stood a rectangular table laden with food, surrounded by comfortable chairs. Galahad immediately spotted Lancelot, Tristan and Gawain, along with Hollis, Isolde and Guinevere—and Lady Beatrix. They all wore fashionable clothing, though it was much more casual than the garb they had donned for the ball. But before Galahad could speak, the king appeared in front of them, smiling.

“Thank you so much for coming,” the king said quietly, holding out his hand to Meira.

Meira wore a deep pink dress trimmed with elegant lace, her hair pinned up in curls. She took the king’s hand, and smiled softly back at him. The king, leaning closer to her, searched her face.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.

She nodded, making the pearls in her earrings glimmer.

“I am so very sorry that we caused you grief yesterday,” the king said, his eyes bright and his voice gently earnest. “I hope you know that *none* of us here would ever do anything to intentionally hurt you.”

Meira returned his earnest look, and nodded quickly. And Galahad saw her squeeze the king’s hand. The king gave her another apologetic glance, then released her and held out his hand to Galahad.

“I am sorry your companion felt uneasy yesterday—which no doubt made *you* uneasy,” the king said, his brow furrowing. “Please forgive us.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Galahad answered. “Neither of us was offended. And we’re happy to be here this evening.”

The king beamed, lightly slapping the back of Galahad’s hand with his free one.

“I’m glad to hear it. Please, come—let’s sit down and eat.” And he waved them toward the table.

Galahad found his place setting across from Meira, and to the left of Sir Gawain—who sat next to the king. Lady Hollis sat to the king’s right, beside Meira. Lancelot settled to Galahad’s left, across from Isolde. Tristan sat beside Isolde, across from Guinevere. And Lady Beatrix sat at the opposite head of the table.

With a cheery greeting and thanks to all of them, the king commenced the meal. Servants stepped up and doled out helpings of game hen, roast potatoes and onions, raspberries and blackberries, and poured white wine for everyone. The soft candlelight cast everything in a warm, rich, fragrant glow—glittering in the ladies’ simple jewelry, shining in everyone’s eyes.

Especially Meira’s.

Galahad possessed no appetite. He could only watch her as she sat across from him. Watch the way her earrings glistened, her cheeks blushed; how two free curls fell across her forehead…

And how she looked at the king.

Her sky-blue gaze lingered upon the young man, caressed his features—drinking in every detail, every movement of his shining head, every smile on his face. When he grinned, her face illuminated. When he laughed, she smiled in delight. When he spoke, she held her breath, as if afraid she would miss a syllable. Whenever he briefly met her eyes, she became incandescent…

And each time he turned away, her light would fade. And that grief—the grief Galahad could now see as plainly as daylight—would mark her entire bearing.

Galahad ate mechanically, and only half his meal. He nodded and attended to everyone who spoke to him…

But his attention kept drawing back to her, bathed in soft candlelight, even as she memorized the very essence of the king.

“I can’t eat another thing,” Sir Gawain finally grunted, laughing, and pushed his plate away.

“Nor I, to be sure,” Guinevere remarked. “So delicious!”

Everyone around the table agreed.

“Come, you must join me in a toast,” the king declared, then snapped his fingers. “Some more wine for everyone, please.”

The servants came forward and refilled everyone’s glass. Then, the king took his up, and arose.

Galahad frowned. He picked up his glass too, watching the king…

Who gazed softly at the far end of the table, at Lady Beatrix. The king’s expression changed. His eyes lit, and something unfamiliar came over him.

Galahad stopped breathing.

“My friends, I asked you all here this evening to bear witness,” he began. “As I desire all of your friendships for many years to come—hopefully the rest of my life. I know the value of friendships, and how they add strength and purpose and honesty to one’s life. The Source has blessed me with several such friendships, but none dearer to me than that of Lady Beatrix Greigh of Arsa Coill.”

Galahad glanced down the table at Lady Beatrix. She looked back at the king, her glass absently held in her hand, her attention captured.

“All my life, she has been there for me,” the king continued. “Through the stillborn death of my brother, my days at academy, my broken leg…” His voice trembled. “The loss of my father. And then…I was there for her, when she lost her own dear sister, Valentine.”

Lady Beatrix gasped and nodded, tears suddenly trailing down her face. The king’s gaze sharpened, and he saw no one but her.

“And now that I have become king, I can conceive of no one I would rather have by my side—no one I would rather have to share the burdens and joys of ruling Mhuirlan. In fact, I…” the king stopped, swallowed, and gave a watery laugh. “I couldn’t bear being without you at all, Bea.”

Beatrix covered her mouth with her hand, more tears tumbling.

“Dearest Lady Beatrix,” the king whispered. “Will you be my queen?”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Sir?”

Galahad didn’t turn. He kept folding his letter, then pressed his seal down on the fold. Scraw hopped impatiently up and down on the desk in front of him, but Galahad’s shoulders and hands—his whole body, in fact—felt heavy.

“What is it, Little Emblyn?” he asked faintly.

“Sir, is it true? The king’s to be married to Lady Beatrix?” she managed.

Galahad didn’t answer. He held the letter up between two fingers, Scraw snapped it out of his grasp, leaped over to the windowsill, and waited. Galahad sighed, leaned over and opened the window. The great bird flapped through the opening and took off into the night.

“I have written to my masters for their advice,” he finally said, gazing out into the blackness. “Until then, we wait.”

“But…” she tried.

“Go to bed, Little Emblyn,” he said flatly. “There isn’t anything to be done tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” she breathed, and he listened as her footsteps trailed off.

He released a ragged sigh and shut his eyes, leaning his shoulder against the window frame. The lamps in the study burnt low, and the shadows hung thick in the corners. The night breeze through the window touched his face, smelling of mist, and the sea.

He felt it.

He didn’t hear anything, but he felt it.

Someone behind him.

He turned around.

Meira, in her nightclothes and dressing gown, her dark hair undone and falling all around her shoulders. She stood in a shaft of moonlight just a few feet from him, with her arms wrapped tight around herself, gripping her sleeves with white-knuckled fingers. She stared at the floor.

Galahad carefully rested his hand on the back of the chair, questions rising in his mind…

None of them came to his mouth.

The two just stood there, motionless. He could see her breathing tightly, her head slightly turned to the side. Then, as if it took a great effort, she lifted her eyes, and risked looking at him for an instant.

Shadows haunted her gaze. Her lip trembled.

Galahad pulled in a shuddering breath—cold washed down through his gut.

Meira took half a step toward him, prying her hands free of her dressing gown, fumbling for the front of his shirt. She caught hold of him, leaning into him, pressing her face into his chest…

And broke down sobbing.

Muffled, broken cries shivered through his body; hot tears bled into his shirt.

And before he could stop himself, he had wrapped his arms all around her.

He pulled her into him, binding her tight. Her muscles quivered, her breathing hitched in spasms. White-cold terror rippled out from her and straight into him.

"No," he gritted, screwing his eyes shut and leaning down to lay his cheek to her ear. "No, Meira, don't be afraid."

She let out a gasping cry, her fingers clawing at him in a panic. He moved his arms and grasped her closer, pressing the side of his face into her hair.

"I have you," he insisted in a rough whisper. "*I* have you." He shook his head so she could feel it, then rested his chin on the crown of her head, enfolding her with his entire frame.

"I came here for this purpose, Meira," he breathed. "To protect the guardian of that seal. And I will. I *swear* that I will." His jaw tightened. "I will *not* let her beat us. Not while I'm still alive."

Her shaking calmed. Her cries subsided. Within his arms, he felt her ease, and she turned her head, resting it against his heart. And at last, she let out a long, exhausted sigh.

He backed up just slightly from her, dipping his head to see her features—but the darkness hid them. So he reached up, took her head in his hands, and tilted her face toward the moonlight.

Tears glittered in rivers down her white cheeks. The silvery moonlight blazed in her eyes, teardrops like dew upon her lashes. Galahad softly stroked the tear tracks away with his thumbs, gazing back down at her.

Then, as they stood in silence, her fingers curled around his collar—and she blinked. Fresh tears fell, but her eyebrows drew together. As if she were seeing him for the very first time.

Galahad released her. He stepped back, dropping his hands, and turned to the window—fighting against the sudden tremors in his muscles.

"You should go to bed," he said shortly. "We all need sleep."

She didn't move. But he didn't look at her. So, finally, she whispered out of the library.

Galahad sagged forward, resting his forearm against the wall, pressing his forehead to his wrist…

"Decide to do the impossible," he breathed—shut his eyes, and ground his teeth.

Galahad returned from his early morning ride to find Little Emblyn standing on the front stoop with letters in her hand. Galahad dismounted from Thondorfax and pulled off his gloves, frowning at her.

"What is it?"

"Letters for you," Little Emblyn said, shakily holding them up. "Well… One from the palace, and one that Scraw gave me."

"Scraw gave it to *you?*" Galahad asked, taking them from her.

"Yes, sir," she murmured, looking pale. And without saying anything more, she dipped a curtsey and went back inside. Galahad turned his attention to the letters.

One bore a red seal—the personal seal of the king. He broke the seal and opened it.

Galahad,

The knights and I were discussing your mission in Metern after you and Lady Meira left the party last evening. I told them what you told me about my father's ship at the Ruined Mount, and they are gravely concerned, as I am, about Myrkur and the threat she may pose. Have you yet made any progress in discovering the identity of the missing Seal Guardian, or what Myrkur may want with the forest around the Ruined Mount?

James

Galahad rolled his eyes, folded the letter up and stuffed it in his pocket. Then, he broke Reola's seal on the other letter, and read.

Galahad,

This is the worst news I could have imagined. If you bid me, I shall come directly to you—the only reason I am not following this letter is that Rose Melhorn may be in growing peril in Spegel, and we are all extremely worried for her. My heart is torn in two directions.

Meantime, at least I can share my thoughts with you.

You are correct in sensing sinister motives within that unexpected storm. I share your sentiments exactly: that Myrkur was behind it, and that she succeeded in flooding the Ruined Mount, which may have sent her tentacles out over the entire island. She may have learned a great deal about the king and Lady Beatrix, as well as you and Meira. As you doubtlessly have concluded, if the weather turns stormy again, Myrkur may be trying to learn more, or change something she has discovered. But if it is fair and bright, she is satisfied with the state of things. Either may be fatal to Meira.

The only hope I have to offer is that, perhaps, the king is feeling insecure and lonely, which is why he turns to an old friend now to make a union. A long friendship is a great power to contend with, I must confess—but it is possible that he harbors romantic feelings for Meira, especially if she is as beautiful and charming as you say. If there remains even the slightest chance that he might, then I would recommend giving Meira a Scríobh potion. Even though it will only last a few hours, it should enable her to write a letter to the king. She must pour out her heart, tell him what he means to her. Be distressed, if she must! Propose marriage, if she must! Beg him to postpone his wedding. Anything she can say to give him pause, to consider her, to awaken feelings in his heart for her. Now is the time for desperate measures.

But I must confess to you, Galahad…

I have very little hope of this mermaid surviving in the end. The odds were stacked against her before she ever made the bargain. Myrkur made certain of that.

Keep me informed.

Reola

Galahad refolded this letter much more slowly, and stood staring into the abyss for a long time. Eventually, he lifted his eyes, listening to the distant roar of the waves. And he put the letter in his pocket, climbed back on his horse, and rode out of the yard.

Galahad rode at a long stride along the hilly lanes, hooves scraping gravel, still kicking up mud from the storm. His cape flapped out behind him, and he set his jaw as he maneuvered around herds of sheep, mule-drawn carts, and groups of workers hiking to and from the mines.

At last, he arrived on the outskirts of Megipesk and the streets turned to cobble. He rattled down the central lane, through the noisy merchants and the smell of fresh-caught fish. He made his way down, down, all the way to the reaches of the town to the long piers where the fishing boats bobbed and swayed.

Thondorfax's feet clomped heavily on the wooden dock as Galahad guided him out amidst the waves at a walk.

A full gust of sea wind swept through Galahad's hair and clothes, filling his lungs with the scent of brine. He leaned back, and Thondorfax stopped at the very end of the dock. Out to sea just a short distance, a two-masted ship coasted languidly along, half her sails down. On board, as the crew made her ready to make port soon, they all sang together at the tops of their voices. And as Galahad listened, he found he couldn't move, or even breathe.

"The work was hard and the voyage was long,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
The sea was high and the gales were strong.
And it's time for us to leave her!

Leave her, Johnny, leave her—
Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!

For the voyage is done and the winds don’t blow
And it’s time for us to leave her.”

Several of the sailors had young, beautiful voices—Galahad was forced to acknowledge that music must run in the blood of Mhuirlanians. And so the song—sung with a lingering lift—took on a wistful yearning, a hardship, a fondness, a *regret*…

One that he had never felt. But it sank down through him.

“The wind was foul and the sea ran high,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
She shipped it green and none went by
And it's time for us to leave her!

Leave her, Johnny, leave her—
Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
For the voyage is done and the winds don’t blow
And it’s time for us to leave her.”

Galahad’s hands went slack on the reins and his eyes drifted shut. The music swelled over the waves to him, overpowering all other sounds, pierced by the lonely cry of the gulls.

“She's poverty stricken a' parish-rigged,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
The bloomin' crowd is fever-stricked
And it's time for us to leave her!

She will not wear, nor steer, nor stay,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Her sails and gear all carried away.
And it's time for us to leave her!

Oh, leave her, Johnny, and we'll work no more,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Of pump or drown, we've had full store.
And it's time for us to leave her!”

A deep, shaking sigh escaped him, and he lowered his head. The shadow of the sails fell across him as the ship passed, the flap of the canvas called to him.

“We're all of us old and weak n' sad,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Since we first joined this ruddy wooden-clad
And it's time for us to leave her!

Leave her, Johnny, leave her—
Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
For the voyage is done and the winds don’t blow
And it’s time for us to leave her.”

Galahad lifted his head and opened his eyes. The ship floated past, dolphins leaping in its wake, gulls swirling around her crow’s nest. And the final verse and refrain flew from the deck and rested upon his shoulders.

“Leave her, Johnny, ye can leave her like a man,
Leave her, Johnny, leave her!
Oh, leave her, Johnny, oh, leave her while you can!
And it's time for us to leave her!

Leave her, Johnny, leave her—
Oh, leave her, Johnny, leave her!
For the voyage is done and the winds don’t blow
And it’s time for us to leave her!”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Galahad sat at the table in the library, open books spread out all across its surface. A forgotten cup of tea—his only luncheon—had gone cold by his right elbow. He braced his forehead in his left hand as he pored over the tome in front of him. It was bright and clear outside, so the open windows provided enough light without a lamp.

Tap, tap, tap.

His head came up and he looked to the door.

Meira dropped her hand—she's knocked on the doorframe.

"Come in," he motioned to her, straightening up—then winced at the stiff pain in his back and neck. Meira drew closer. She wore her simple brown dress and white apron, her hair braided. She looked pale. Galahad got up, gritting his teeth and stretching his shoulders, then sighed and faced her.

"My masters have a suggestion for us," he began. "Let me know what you think."

Meira swallowed, but clasped her hands in hfront of her and nodded.

Galahad hesitated, then glanced down at the book and tapped the tabletop. Frowning, he formed his words carefully before he spoke.

"My masters and I agree that there may be a chance that the king is merely proposing to Lady Beatrix out of loneliness, and a desire to hold onto the golden days of his past. That he may, in fact, harbor true affection for you that has, at the moment, been overshadowed." He finally met her eyes. "We think you ought to let him know how you feel."

Meira's eyes widened and her lips parted.

"I have a potion I can give you," Galahad continued. "It will only last about six hours—but it will enable you to write in Edeltung." He picked up a small blue bottle off the table and took three steps toward her. "Don't let him know you're merfolk. But tell him whatever else you can think of that might make him hesitate, might force him to think of you instead of Beatrix." He held it out to her. "I have plenty of paper and a good pen."

Meira lost even more of her color, and her eyes went grey as winter. She took a shaking breath, searching his face.

"Come," Galahad said quietly, glancing down but lifting the potion to her. "This may be your last chance to win him."

Meira stood there for a long time, her gaze fixed on him. He just tightened his mouth and regarded the rug, holding the bottle out.

At last, she reached up and took it from him. She pulled the cork out, and took a sip. She swallowed without coughing.

"All right," Galahad turned from her, briskly shut several of the books and moved them out of the way, then snatched five sheets of paper off the desk, along with his pen, and set them down in front of the chair. "I'll leave you to it." And without looking at her again, he strode past her and out of the library.

Steam rose from Galahad's plate of roasted mutton and carrots, and he carefully poured himself a glass of wine. Meira sat across from him, poking at her meat with her fork. The evening had darkened, and only two lamps burned in the dining room. A high wind gusted across the moors, rattling the windows of the bedrooms upstairs.

The front door squeaked open. Then, it shut quietly. Galahad paused, his fork halfway to his mouth, and looked up.

Little Emblyn trailed into the dining room, holding an open letter in both hands. Tears ran down her face.

Meira dropped her fork and stared.

"Emblyn, what is it?" Galahad asked.

"I'm sorry, sir," Little Emblyn gasped. "This just came from the palace, and since I know you can't read, Miss, I…"

"It's addressed to Meira?" Galahad demanded.

"Yes, sir," she whimpered, nodding.

"What does it say?"

Little Emblyn's face twisted, but she sniffed, braced herself, and held up the letter.

"'Dear Lady Meira: I know this shall come as a surprise to you and my other friends, but I do hope it is a joyful surprise. James and I have decided to marry immediately.'" Little Emblyn clapped a hand over her mouth.

A cold chill traveled down through Galahad's ribs. Meira went still as stone.

Little Emblyn shook out her hand, sucked in a breath, and made herself go on.

"'We plan to have a very small ceremony this coming Friday, with only our families and closest friends in attendance—for enough of a fuss will be made over me in a month's time at my coronation. James and I would be blessed and secured by the presence of two Curse-Breakers at the ceremony. Further than that, I ask you, Lady Meira, to be one of my attendants for the wedding. I have also asked Lady Isolde, Lady Guinevere, and Lady Hollis. My attendants are invited to come to the palace tomorrow night to spend a lavish evening with me in the ladies' guest chambers before the wedding—we shall feast and play games together, and shall have a marvelous time.'" More tears welled up in Little Emblyn's eyes and spilled. Her voice trembled almost uncontrollably. *"'I so look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening. Give my regards and thanks to Stormcrane—and please relay my fiancé's thanks for the swift reply to his note this morning. Your indebted friend: Lady Beatrix.'"* Little Emblyn's gaze flew to Meira, and a cry burst out of her. "Oh, Miss—what are we going to *do?"*

Galahad shoved his bench back and got up. He rounded the table and stood between both women. He gave Little Emblyn a firm look, then turned it on Meira.

"First," he said slowly. "We will *not* despair. Do you understand me?" He raised his eyebrows at both of them. Little Emblyn's quivering calmed, and she nodded—though she still gripped the letter in two hands. Meira just gazed back up at him, her lips pale.

"Meira has written a letter to the king," Galahad explained, facing Little Emblyn. "She's declared her love for him and asked him to reconsider his marriage—correct?" He turned to Meira.

Meira's gaze had gone distant, and she stared at nothing, but she nodded.

"She will be able to give it to him when she goes to the palace tomorrow evening," Galahad finished. "We may yet have a chance."

Little Emblyn just stared at Meira, her lip quivering.

"Yes, sir," she whispered—and, letting the letter fall from her hands, she raced up the stairs to her room.

Galahad picked up his pocket watch, and had to rub his eyes so he could focus to see it. It read 3 o'clock. Three—in the morning.

He sat once more in the library at the table in front of a dozen old books. All afternoon, and then into the evening, he had scoured the library for every single Curse-Breaking book he could find, as well as all those dealing with the seven seals and their guardians. He had now read them all.

Now, one lay open before him, turned to a very particular page. A page he had now read seven times over again. The paper was age-stained, its edges torn; the writing was small and pinched, with example symbols crammed into the margins. He read each word slowly now, letting its meaning absorb fully into his mind. Each time he finished reading the long and detailed prose, he would sit back and lay his finger across his lips, and let his gaze unfocus.

Now, after the eighth time, he slowly pushed his chair back and stood up. He ignored the pain in his head, shoulders and back, and the throbbing in the long scar on his chest and face. He folded his arms, staring down at that page, lit by one lamp.

He took a deep, slow breath, and let it out. Absently, he rubbed the edge of his scar near his shoulder, through his shirt. Outside, the high, dark wind still rushed over the moors, dispelling all the clouds, filling the island with fresh, warm air. The day would be fair and lovely, tomorrow.

Galahad set his jaw as the words upon the page, now memorized, wandered in sequence through his head. At last, he leaned forward, blew out the lamp, and made his way out of the library and up to his room.

The afternoon sun hung low in the sky. Galahad stood on the upstairs landing just beside the stairwell, gazing out the window, his hands clasped behind him.

This morning, he had taken his customary ride—but today he had pushed Thondorfax to his full speed, racing through the tearing wind, eating up moorland in a flash, with Scraw soaring overhead. Many times, Galahad had drawn up to the edge of a cliff, panting and searching the reaches of the water, seeking out the mainland, trying to spot the edges of the Eisenzahn Mountains…

And inevitably finding his attention drifting to the boats and ships in the channel, freely sailing to and fro, making port upon the mainland of Mhuirlan or even following the coast past the borders, to the coast of Anhaga…

Now, his watch told him it was five in the afternoon, on Thursday. He wore his riding clothes, but no sword. And as he surveyed the garden below, he saw Little Emblyn meander out into it, and sit down on the lowest portion of the wall near the gate, facing the road.

He set his teeth, then made his way down the stairs, into the dining room and the kitchen, then out into the garden. The sky was a brilliant blue and the air smelled fresh and sweet. Birds twittered in the verdant bushes and the trees, and a gentle breeze tossed the leaves. Little Emblyn sat in a ray of gold sunshine, her back to him. Galahad stopped several paces from her.

“Little Emblyn,” he said quietly. “I need you to help Meira pack for tonight. We’ll be leaving in an hour.”

“No.”

Galahad blinked. Little Emblyn’s voice had come out watery—but firm. His brow furrowed.

“What did you say?”

“I said no,” she repeated, wrapping her arms around herself. “I’m not making her go.”

Galahad stepped closer to her, coming round to try to see her profile. Her pale face was lifted to the hills, her expression set, tears sparkling on her cheeks.

“Who said anything about *making* her go?” Galahad asked. “She wants to go.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Little Emblyn shot back. “I asked her.”

Galahad braced his hands on the wall and hung his head for an instant, then straightened up and faced her. She still didn’t look at him.

“Well, she doesn’t truly have a choice,” he bit out.

“Yes, she does, and she’s made it. She shouldn’t be forced to go,” Little Emblyn persisted—and suddenly turned on him. “Would *you* want to? Would you want to stand by and watch while the one you loved married someone else?”

Galahad’s face suddenly burned.

“You’re far too bold—”

“I don’t care,” Little Emblyn retorted, facing away from him again. “I was wrong. We all were. She isn’t the Cinder Girl.” Her hands twisted around her apron. “She’s just a little mermaid no one wants to marry. And now she’s going to die.”

Galahad ground his teeth, pressing his hand to his mouth and screwing his eyes shut. Finally, he dropped his hand and scowled at the house.

“Where is she?” he growled.

“In the library,” Little Emblyn muttered.

And without another word, Galahad swept back into the house to find her.

“What is this about not wanting to go to the palace?”

Meira, who sat at his desk at the far end of the library near the window, turned at the sound of his voice. She still wore a plain beige dress and white apron, her hair braided. Galahad stormed into the library, his blood hot.

“You *aren’t* going to give your letter to the king?” he demanded. “Do you *want* to die?”

Her face flushed and her eyes flashed, and she stood up. Her lips parted —

“No,” Galahad cut her off, pointing severely at her. “You don’t have any choice in the matter. We agreed on this course of action.”

Meira let out an indignant laugh and pointed to herself, then shook her head.

“Oh, yes you did,” he snapped. “The day I found you. You promised you would do whatever I ordered you to do—and *this* is what I am ordering. Because, regardless of your *personal* distress, Princess, there is a great deal more at stake here than your life.”

Her eyes blazed again, and her gaze intensified like lightning. He strode up to her, burying her with a glare—she glared right back at him.

“When you so thoughtlessly deserted your post at the Mhuirlan Seal, you opened it up to *countless* deadly dangers,” he spat. “Exposing the entire northeast coast to despicable, horrifying powers that could destroy this entire kingdom, as well as the kingdom of Anhaga. And now *I* am the one who must protect everyone from all of that,” he slapped a hand to his chest. “Even if it costs me my life—and it may very well do that now that Myrkur has managed to flood the woods at the Ruined Mount.”

Meira’s eyes suddenly filled with blue, but Galahad shook his head and cut her off with a gesture, looming over her.

“No. You will go to the palace tonight and give the king that letter,” he muttered harshly. “You *will* do your part to mend this, as I have done mine.” His gaze locked on hers as a fearful ache clenched his chest. He shook his head, his voice dropping to almost nothing. “You have been so selfish, Meira—with absolutely *no* regard for how you might fatally wound the people around you.” He searched her face, his brow twisting. “Have you *ever* thought about anyone but yourself?”

Her eyes shone, and she just stared at him.

A shaft of pain traveled though Galahad’s heart and he twisted away.

“Do what you know is right,” he snapped. “I will be waiting with Thondorfax in one hour.”

As the day faded to purple in the east, Meira and Little Emblyn stood locked in an embrace on the front stoop. Little Emblyn buried her face in Meira’s shoulder, for she was shorter than the princess, and Meira held tight to the girl, rubbing her hand up and down her back.

Galahad waited by Thondorfax, his arms crossed. He watched the two women as long as he could, then turned to gaze out at the darkening road.

Finally, with a soft, resigned cry, Little Emblyn released Meira and swiped at her face with both hands. Meira smiled at her, gripping her shoulders briefly before letting her go and coming up to Thondorfax. She didn’t look at Galahad as she passed him—just put her foot in the stirrup and mounted the horse. Galahad glanced over at Little Emblyn…

The girl spun away from him, went back into the house, and slammed the door. Galahad stayed where he was for a moment, biting the inside of his lip. Then, he took a bracing breath and climbed into the saddle.

Thondorfax shifted his weight as Galahad settled himself behind Meira. He started to put his arm around her waist…

And stopped. He’d forgotten his gloves.

The horse shifted again, and snorted. Galahad set his jaw, and just lightly rested his left hand on Meira’s hip. Then, he nudged Thondorfax’s flanks, and they trotted out of the yard.

They rode up into the greying evening, the night birds twittering sleepily as the tramp of horse hooves interrupted the quiet. As they reached the high moors, Galahad urged more speed, and Thondorfax extended out into a graceful gallop. Meira's braid fell over Galahad's shoulder, the fresh scent of her overwhelming him. In a moment of blind temptation, he almost leaned down to press his lips to her fragrant neck…

He steeled himself and wrapped the reins around his right hand, forcing himself to attend to the road ahead.

They slowed their pace as they entered the wood, fireflies dancing through the air. They followed the winding path, now as familiar as their own garden, until it led out to the palace gardens.

Perlkastel glowed from within—a warm, homey light; soft and convivial. Three carriages now stood before the gate, and voices of welcome resounded over the quiet songs of the fountains.

Galahad drew Thondorfax to a halt before they entered the halo of surrounding light. Meira halfway glanced back at him in question…

Galahad let go the reins and slipped off the back of the horse. He landed heavily, keeping one hand on Thondorfax's hip, and squeezing his eyes shut. All of his scars ached. Finally, he made himself come around, and lift his arms to Meira.

She stayed where she was, looking down at him. He refused to meet her eyes.

At last, she leaned toward him, rested her hands on his shoulders, and hopped off. Her fingers drifted down his sleeves, then let him go. And she stayed where she was.

"I'll see that your things are brought to you," Galahad murmured, still studying the rose beds. "I'll come in the morning."

She didn't move. He shifted, feeling as if something was sticking him in the ribs.

"If he…" he started, then his throat closed. He swallowed. "If he *does* marry her…How long will you have?"

He risked a sideways look at her. Her eyebrows drew together, and then she pointed to the east, and lifted her hand.

"Dawn of the next day," Galahad guessed. She nodded once.

He mirrored the nod, casting his gaze down.

Then, Meira held out her right hand to him.

He twitched, wincing. Staring at her graceful fingers. Clenching his jaw.

Then, with a rush of breath, he took up her hand, bent low, and kissed it.

He pressed his lips to her skin, her warmth stinging him. Her wrist smelled of honey and roses. He closed his eyes, his brow knotted.

Then, he broke his kiss, wrenched his head away and let go of her hand.

“Goodnight,” he clipped, grabbing the saddle and mounting, then hauling Thondorfax’s head around. He clicked to him, riding briskly back toward the forest gate…

But then, Thondorfax’s gait lagged. And the horse paused, and looked back up the garden.

Galahad, unable to fight it, did the same.

Meira stood beside the fountain where he had left her, the skirts of her velvet blue gown trailing across the stones, the hand he had just kissed pressed to her heart.

Her eyes on him.

For an endless moment, he stood there, his reins in his hands. Looking back into the eyes of the beautiful little mermaid. Then, he lowered his head, turned his horse, and plunged into the woods once more.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Galahad! What a glorious day, is it not?” Sir Gawain slapped him on the shoulder in greeting as they strode up to the palace gates together. Galahad wore a deep blue suit and coat, with a thunderous cape billowing out behind him, the side length of which attached to the wrist of his left coat sleeve. The late afternoon sun blazed overhead, lighting the entire palace and gardens with lavish color. Galahad nodded to Sir Gawain—who wore white and gold livery today—and rested his hand on the butt of his own sword.

“Yes,” Galahad agreed. “I don’t think I’ve seen a single cloud.”

“Not a one,” Gawain laughed. “We’ll take it as a good sign!”

Galahad didn’t reply, but managed an amiable-enough expression as the two of them strode through the gates.

“I don’t imagine the ladies got to bed until the wee hours of the morning,” Gawain chuckled. “Hollis told me that Lady Beatrix brought a fortune teller, a dance instructor, a group of singers and a puppet show to entertain them last night.” Gawain glanced at Galahad. “Hollis has grown fond of Meira. And I know everyone hopes that she will stay on a while.”

“She may,” Galahad replied absently as they crossed the corridor and passed through the main doors. Together, they strode down the long, marble hallway, and entered the grand audience chamber where Galahad had first met the prince.

Sunlight flooded the long, brilliant room, flashing through the crystal chandeliers and striking against the gold filigree on the ceiling. The channel sparkled outside the wide bank of windows, and the mainland shone like an emerald tapestry.

The receiving dais now bore an altar, overarched by a trellis of white roses, honeysuckle, and holly branches. Two dozen chairs had been lined up, a dozen in each section, with an aisle up the middle. People milled about, visiting with each other—they wore simple, flowing whites and

blues. Galahad recognized the queen mother, Sir Lancelot and Sir Tristan, and a few of the king's advisors and other courtiers, but no one else. A fair-haired, shining couple near the windows, talking to Sir Lancelot, wore clouds of purest white, and beaming smiles. The lady had faded blonde hair and a pleasant face—but the man stood tall and striking, with shoulder-length white hair, penetrating glance, and refined features. These had to be Lady Beatrix's parents.

Galahad slowed to a standstill. Everyone in the room appeared happy and calm. If anything had already happened that would keep this wedding from taking place…

They were unaware of it.

Galahad swallowed.

"Will you be sitting on the king's side?" Gawain cut into his thoughts.

"Yes, at the back," Galahad replied faintly.

"All right, I'm going to go find the king," Gawain said. "Try to calm his nerves!" And the knight headed off to a far door. Just then, Sir Lancelot spotted Galahad and waved him over. Taking a breath, Galahad obeyed.

"Galahad Stormcrane, may I introduce you to Lady Astrid and Lord Arnaud Greigh of the castle of Arsa Coill."

The beautiful lord and lady inclined their heads to him, and Galahad bowed deeply.

"It is an honor," he said.

"The honor is ours," Lord Arnaud replied, his voice smooth as the evening sea. "We have heard of your accomplishments in Deargland and Gormland, as well as in Zwergland among the dwarves."

"And of course, my father-in-law owes you a great debt," Lady Astrid added. "He regrets he cannot be here, but at the moment he is visiting his brother in the Adria Tangle."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Galahad admitted. "I should have liked to make his acquaintance again."

"I am certain you will someday soon," Lord Arnaud replied. "King James has told me how greatly admired you are amongst the court, and how he values your council and help. We all hope that you visit Mhuirlan often."

"Thank you," Galahad said, biting back a deepening pain. "It is…a beautiful kingdom."

"Did the suddenness of the wedding surprise you?" Sir Lancelot asked. The parents thought for a moment, then shook their heads.

“No, not really,” Lord Arnaud answered. “They’ve been in love since they were both fifteen years old.”

“But as far as preparations go, yes!” Lady Astrid amended. “No time to make wedding clothes!”

“That’s all right, though,” Lord Arnaud said. “Beatrix is wearing her mother’s wedding gown, and I believe King James is wearing his father’s wedding clothes. I’m sure they’ll suit.”

A bell rang out. Everyone stopped speaking and turned to see an official bearing a silver bell stride into the room, ringing it in time with his steps. Immediately, the guests dispersed to their separate sides of the room. Lord and Lady Greigh bowed to Galahad again, and made for the bride’s side of the room. Galahad followed Lancelot to the king’s side, a terrible sinking in his gut.

“I must attend to the king,” Lancelot whispered to him. Galahad nodded quickly, and Lancelot hurried out of the room, along with Sir Tristan. The bell ringer stopped at the dais and turned to face the room. This was the signal to be seated, and so every guest found his chair and sat down, parents in the fore. Galahad sank into the chair furthest back, clenching his teeth, and waited.

Then, a second bell resounded, deeper than the first. And the king emerged from the grand doorway.

He wore a sky-blue doublet embroidered with sparkling silver designs of waves and ships and fish, and adorned with pearls. His trousers were deeper blue, his black boots polished to shining. A vast, flowing white cape draped from his shoulders and trailed behind him, frothing like sea foam in the wake of the tide. He wore a crown of Metern silver upon his halo of golden hair—a tall, silver crown with white seashells, pearls, opals and sapphires enwreathed in its elegant spires.

Galahad sat up straight, desperately searching the king’s face for any disconcertion, any unease…

But the king’s eyes lit with sunlight, and his gaze fixed upon the end of the room.

He marched slowly and solemnly toward the altar, with Lancelot, Tristan and Gawain following behind, each of the knights shining like angels. The king achieved his place at the altar and turned to face the aisle. Sir Lancelot knelt to arrange the king’s train, then arose and stood beside him.

Then, the scarlet-clad priest entered, bearing his ancient book of marriage banns. He stood upon the altar and faced the chamber, smiling at the king—who returned it.

Galahad's breath shook.

Another bell. It sang out in a brilliant peal, like a morning lark. The king's head turned…

The smile fell from his face.

To be replaced by a soft, piercing, singular look—as if no one else in the world existed.

Galahad's eyes closed tightly.

But then he forced himself to open them, to stand up with everyone else…

And turn to see Lady Beatrix walking up the aisle.

She wore white, of the same ethereal fabric as her parents. Her gown wrapped easily around her comely figure like mist, cascading out behind her in waves and clouds that shimmered at the hems. Her long golden hair hung down in majestic curls dripping with pearls and little roses. She wore three strings of pearls around her neck, and carried a single white rose. Her features glowed like starlight, her shining eyes finding the king and never leaving him.

Behind her walked Lady Guinevere, in a dress of blue lace, her red hair also loose and hanging to her waist. Behind her followed Lady Isolde in a simple ivory dress, her deep-blonde tresses done up with red rosebuds. And behind her…

Meira.

Wearing her flowing blue velvet dress and one strand of pearls. Her chestnut hair completely loose, no adornment—tumbling in shining rivers down her shoulders and back. Her eyes, grey as frost, gazed upon Beatrix's back, and did not stir. She glided up the aisle behind the other women—expressionless and serene. As if she was walking on a hilltop, all alone.

Galahad's chest locked, and his hand under his cape clenched around the handle of his sword. But he didn't move.

There was nothing to do.

At long last, Beatrix reached the altar, and faced the king. Her attendants filed in behind her, forming a line at the front of the room, mirroring the king's attendants. And the wedding guests resumed their seats, except the parents.

Galahad sat down heavily, unable to tear his attention from Meira. Meira, who looked at nothing, her head tilted down. The priest began the ceremony by asking permission of Beatrix's father and the king's mother, but Galahad couldn't hear him. The priest's voice echoed unintelligibly through the audience hall like words shouted through water.

The parents seated themselves then, and the priest launched into an eloquent speech about love—true, binding love—coming directly from the Source, as a sacred gift, a commitment, an immortal power. Galahad's fists tightened so hard that pain began dancing around in his palms and knuckles. Meira didn't shift. She stood with her hands loosely clasped, breathing slowly.

The priest issued the vows, beginning with Beatrix, in repetitions of three. Beatrix, gripping the king's hand, gazed up into his face with a beautiful smile, and repeated the vows without hesitation. She took the ring from the priest, and slid it onto the king's left hand. Then, the priest spoke to the king.

And Meira's head came up.

She stared at King James, who gazed deeply at Beatrix as he repeated the vows, his expression filled with delight. He took a ring from the priest, now, and slipped it onto Beatrix's left hand.

"And now," announced the priest. "By the holy power vested in me, I present to you the bonded pair: King James and Queen Beatrix of the royal house of Mhuirlan. Your Majesty, you may kiss your queen."

Before the priest had finished his sentence, the king had leaned in and kissed Beatrix ardently. Beatrix immediately dropped her rose and pulled him in as close as she could—and the family and friends got to their feet and burst into applause and cheering.

Galahad alone still sat there, unable to look away from Meira.

Meira, who gazed at them kissing…

And then she lowered her eyes, and closed them.

Galahad stood up.

He whirled, pushed past a courtier, and without looking back, left the wedding hall and departed the palace.

As the sun drifted down toward the horizon, Galahad rode.

Thondorfax thundered beneath him, his mane and tail whipping in the wind, Galahad's cape storming out behind him. They raced away from the palace, across the green hills, following the narrow lanes traveled only by miners. He tracked the cliffside paths for miles, gradually descending toward the town of Megipesk. The evening bells rang out and the bustle of the merchants rose to meet him. He didn't check his speed.

People leaped out of the way, yelping and tossing whatever they carried into the air, throwing curses after him as he ploughed down the central street. Thondorfax's hooves clattered deafeningly across the stones as they swept past the town square and the fountain, heading straight toward the sea.

Finally, the channel opened up before them, gleaming with golden, late-afternoon sunshine. Galahad wheeled Thondorfax to the right and urged him into a faster pace, pounding across the sand, kicking through the foam, sending it spraying out behind them.

The sea air filled his lungs as he bent down over Thondorfax's neck, and gulls swooped close over his head. The cliffs rose to their right, stretching to the faultless blue sky. Up ahead, he glimpsed an outcropping of black rocks, and he leaned back.

Thondorfax whinnied fiercely and hauled himself into a trot. Without waiting for him to stop, Galahad threw himself out of the saddle and hit the sand running. He bolted toward the rocks and leaped on top of them, scaling them like stepping stones until he achieved the highest one, which looked out over the churning waves.

He planted his feet, drew in a deep breath, and shouted into the wind.

"Comhartha!"

Thunder cracked through the cloudless air. It shook the stones beneath his feet and shivered the atmosphere. The waves heaved, throwing up whitecaps in the center of the channel. Galahad tore off his gloves and threw them down. He lowered his head, bracing his shoulders, bending forward, stretching his arms out to the sides. Heat built inside his chest, surging out through his arms, into his head…

"…*éist, éist, éist…*" he hissed.

The waves seethed in response, a deep pulse beginning within the depths. Magic suddenly buzzed all around his face like electricity, lighting up the edges of his vision.

The tip of the sun touched the horizon.

Galahad *clapped*.

Out in the middle of the channel, the water flung itself up into the sky.

He bared his teeth, letting out a visceral roar, his whole body shaking as he stretched his hands out, grasped writhing tentacles of invisible magic and twisted them.

The water rolled back like a scroll, even as he pried it loose—it gave way and opened up, laying bare a small circle on the bottom of the channel.

Gasping and grinding his teeth, Galahad wrenched the sea back, back, back, feeling it spill away from the center of the channel and flood the beaches. The strands of wild magic tried to wrench themselves out of his grasp—he clamped down, winding them around his wrists, his muscles trembling.

Then, he pulled his arms close to each other and wrapped his hands around the rope of magic. He adjusted his stance and *heaved* back, as if he was hoisting a great sail.

The water retreated in a great circle, foaming and frothing furiously. Again, he leaned forward and hauled back, sweat running down his face. The curtain of sea withdrew even more, until finally, the great Mhuirlan Seal lay bare.

Snarling, Galahad brought the strands of magic around behind his waist, then shoved them down toward his feet.

And let go.

Like an anchor chain sliding off the deck, the magic lashed back toward whence it came—

Caught him up and flung him into the air.

He leaped up with it, arching high over the waters, somersaulting at the peak. Then, he plummeted straight down, his cape howling behind him, and landed in the center of the seal.

He collapsed into a kneeling position. Power rippled out from his boots and shook the bare, wet stones beneath him.

Slowly, he arose and straightened his shoulders, casting a wary look at the boiling and spitting forty-foot wall of water that surrounded him. Cold spray misted across him, soaking his hair and clothes. He lifted a finger and narrowed his eyes.

“Stay there,” he muttered.

Then, he took four deliberate steps, and paused in the very center of the seal.

Huge runes marked the weathered, uneven surface, coated with seaweed, dotted with seashells and barnacles. He stood just before the center downward point of the M-shaped central rune. His cape stirred restlessly around him, and a swirling wind tossed his hair.

"Great Northeastern Seal," he said quietly—but his voice shook the seabed. "I have come to give you a new guardian."

The stones vibrated in response—subterranean chords sent chills up through his bones.

Galahad held his right hand out over the center of the rune. He took another deep breath, letting the light that blazed inside him to flow out through his arm and into his palm. And as it did, his very skin began to glow.

"Hear me, Seal of Mhuirlan," he said, closing his eyes. "For these many years, your guardian has been one of the family of Strom, King Under the Water. No more."

Small stones bounced across the seal and struck his boots. Galahad planted his feet and did not move.

"From this day onward," he went on, his left hand closing. "Your guardian shall not be Princess Meira daughter of Strom, but *Beatrix*, daughter of Anauld, son of Eidrid the Halfelfin, Queen of Mhuirlan." Heat pulsed in Galahad's right hand, and the glow from his fist burned against his eyelids. "Furthermore," he went on. "Your guardianship shall now be passed on to the heirs of the royal family of Mhuirlan, forever after, until the breaking of the world."

The wind coursed around him like a tornado, up into the air, sending sheets of seawater raining across him. The seabed shook.

And then, as Galahad opened his eyes, light poured like molten gold from his hand and into the seal. It gradually filled the giant rune, steaming and smoking, shining like liquid sun.

The sea all around him calmed. The earth settled.

Galahad lowered his hand.

He turned around, casting his gaze across the darkening wall of seawater before him.

He flicked his fingers.

The sea parted before him.

It split as if it sliced by a knife, spilling to the left and right, out of his way.

His cape clouding out behind, Galahad strode into the gap, over the sand, across the jagged rocks, icy wind rushing all around him.

The canyon of water shallowed. Ahead, on the beach, Galahad spotted Thondorfax, who watched him with perked ears. Galahad climbed up and out, lifted his head…

And let the walls of water collapse.

Surf gushed over his boots.

A thunderous roar shook the cliffs as the sea pounded down onto the seal once more.

Galahad did not break stride. He kicked through the foam, leaped up and caught the stirrup with his foot and swung into the saddle. The next moment, he snatched the reins and brought Thondorfax around. The horse threw his head and lunged forward, breaking into another unmatched gallop back up the beach.

Galahad steeled himself, leaning forward and holding tight as the last of the sun vanished below the horizon, and shadows fell across the island.

Now to deal with the Sea Witch.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A full moon and brilliant starlight flooded the hill, and the canopy of the ancient woods. Galahad sat upon Thondorfax, who stood still before the forest wall. The winds rustled the leaves, but no other sounds issued from the dark depth of the trees.

Galahad dismounted. His boots squelched in the grass, sinking in about an inch of water.

He froze, staring down at his feet, watching muddy water languidly course over them.

He set his teeth, and lifted a cold glare to the trees.

With one swift motion, he drew his sword. The silvery metal flashed through the night, casting icy light all around him.

“Wait for me,” he said quietly to his horse. Thondorfax snorted. Without looking back, Galahad marched up the muddy trail to the gap between the two largest beeches.

Blackness closed over him. Only occasional darts of moonlight managed to pierce the thick canopy. He held his sword out before him, allowing it to shine on the road; a road which had become a stream. He splashed upcurrent, listening as trails of water gushed between the roots of all the trees around him.

Water that stank.

The musty, briny, fishy smell overpowered the natural scent of the forest, hanging heavy in the air and smothering the breeze.

The water-soaked path curved and rose, and at last Galahad spotted that half-ruined wall, and scrambled through the soaking underbrush, up the hill, toward the outer stones of the keep.

He paused before the looming gate, chills wandering over his skin. Darkness waited inside: thick, inky darkness—darkness that tasted like ash in his mouth.

He hefted his sword, and stepped through.

His weapon shone in the black, but only enough for him to see roughly ten feet ahead of him. He picked his way across the broken, mossy stones of

the courtyard toward the far end. Toward the door to the staircase that the prince had shown him.

He stopped upon the threshold, holding his blade out over the curved stairs, listening into the void below. But he heard nothing except constant dripping of water from stones. He adjusted his grip on the handle, and ventured down.

His soles scraped quietly against the wet stone, and that sound began to echo into the opening of a tunnel before him. He flexed his left hand and pressed into the opening.

He continued down, spotting a single shaft of moonlight ahead. He passed through its white light, then frowned into the darkness. His feet sank ankle deep into rippling, black water.

He crossed the threshold of the wishing well room, and raised his sword high.

There, in the eerie depths of that mine shaft, a sickly, living green light glowed against the broken skeleton of the *Cygnus*. The eerie light glinted against the silver below, and, with Galahad's movements, reflected brokenly off the walls in the chamber above. The water had spilled out of its place and flooded the walkways around the shaft.

Galahad reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver coin. He held it up in front of him, going still for half a moment.

Then, with a decided *clip* of his fingers, he flipped the coin high into the air—

And shouted her name.

"Raicleach Myrkur!"

The name boomed through the chamber: The name of her nature, her very being: Dragon. Darkness. Hurricane. *Witch*.

A shaft of sourceless lightning slapped the coin in midair, blinding Galahad.

The coin fell, and splashed into the water. It streaked toward the bottom…

And the water began to bubble.

Like a giant cauldron, the water frothed and roiled, rocking against Galahad's knees, trying to push him back. He planted his feet, peering down below…

Black ink poured into the shaft from all sides, obscuring the green light —

Yet gaining a light of its own. A pulsing illumination, like lightning in the heart of a squall.

The water in the shaft began to swirl, and a gaping whirlpool opened up in its center. The corpse of the *Cygnus* broke to flinders, its pieces carried up, up, by the powerful circular current. The ship's bones spilled out of the shaft like refuse, swimming past Galahad's legs, groaning and creaking and snapping, crashing against the stone walls.

Icy wind buffeted him. The black, snarling ink rose to the surface, and the whirlpool inverted, turning to a rising pillar of black brine that soared hight up into the air. Galahad gripped his sword hard as spray rained down on him, chilling him to the marrow.

An ungodly stench flooded the chamber—a stench of rotting flesh, of dying coral, of sill, of mold and sewage. Of death.

White bones gushed out of the tower of water: spindly bones of fishes, human skulls, horses' heads, sharks' teeth, ribs and legs; broken frames of birds. They piled against the walls, slapping against the stones, cracking and cackling in a devilish chorus.

The black, whirling pillar began to take shape. Deep within it, Galahad glimpsed flashes of long, white limbs, and the crown of a head. Then, the seawater convulsed and throbbed, spilling down in pounding waterfalls, finally revealing her form.

A cloak of frayed fishnet, burned sails, rotted burial shrouds, torn tapestries, ripped bedsheets, dead seaweed, tattered sharkskin, lost maps, shredded books, ruined flags, and the billow of storm clouds. It hooded her mighty head, which nearly touched the ceiling of the vault. Its length dripped teeth and scales and fingerbones that rained into the filthy water. Its ghostly edges flowed with an infernal breeze, twisting and gnarling all around her, as if alive itself.

Her face hid in total darkness, her shoulders bony angles beneath her wrap, her clawed feet floating easily atop a surge of green foam. Her bare arms, draped with translucent nets, hung thin and gaunt like a skeleton's, but lightning flashed and pulsed within her spidery veins, and powerful white sinew bound her joints together. Her graceful, ghastly hands bore sharp, curved black claws that gleamed like obsidian. When her cape churned to and fro, as with a surging tide, it revealed her bare hip on one side, and her ribcage on the other: both shining like bones bleached by the sun.

Galahad clenched his teeth, gripping his shining sword with all his might. Never moving.

The great head canted, and he felt its foul gaze fall upon him, though he could see no eyes.

“Galahad Stormcrane.” Her voice rolled beneath the waves like an earthquake, battered the air like a hurricane. “What dost thou want with me?”

“I have come to tell you that your bid for the Northeastern Seal has failed,” Galahad answered, staring directly back up at her. “I have given its guardianship over to another—one even stronger than the daughter of Strom.”

Fishbones hissed from her sleeves, cascading loose and spitting into the foam. She tilted her head far to the other side, leaning toward him.

“Indeed,” she whispered, like the snap of the hangman’s rope. “What causes thee to think I wished for guardianship?”

“I’m not a fool, Myrkur,” Galahad snapped back. “You knew you couldn’t kill a guardian yourself or you’d be destroyed—so you gave Princess Meira a curse so you could overtake the seal.”

A gust of freezing wind blasted through the chamber, and the clatter of dry wood issued from her chest in laughter.

“I know of no curse,” Myrkur breathed. “She willingly came to me for a spell, and I gave it to her.”

“A spell that robbed her of every chance she had to fulfill her side of the bargain,” Galahad retorted. “So that she would die by something *she chose*, and you could step into her place.”

Myrkur said nothing. She lifted one pointed shoulder, and watched him. Galahad tipped the edge of his sword in minute threat.

“Withdraw the spell,” he commanded. “You cannot gain anything from her death. Not now.”

A rushing roar, like the waves receding, inhaled through her ribs.

“I cannot withdraw it,” she said.

Galahad flipped his wrist and plunged the tip of his blade straight down through the water and into the rock.

Power slammed against the walls. Hot wind blasted through the chamber. The sea witch’s cloak billowed like great sails. Galahad grabbed the handle of his sword with both hands and held on. Myrkur leered toward him.

“Release me,” she boomed, sending a stinging, boiling sensation through his blood.

“Let Meira go,” Galahad bit out. “Let her be human and live.”

“Thou knowest better than that, Curse-Breaker,” she snarled, like chains clattering over rocks. “This was a blood spell. It cannot be undone.”

Galahad bared his teeth and twisted his sword.

Myrkurs hands coiled.

“And what if she *had* married the king?” Galahad demanded. “What would have become of your plans, then?”

An eerie cackle broke forth from the depths of her cloak.

“I knew prince James had bound his heart to the lady from Hanter-broder long ago,” she muttered. “He would never have married the mermaid.” Myrkur withdrew toward the back of the chamber, looming up like a giant sepulcher. “Thine efforts here have been in vain, Curse-Breaker,” she seethed. “For this night, I have already given Princess Meira the means to return to her life beneath the sea, to the fellowship of her father and sisters. She will save her *own* life—thou shalt have no hand in it.”

Galahad stared at her, his heart skipping several beats.

“What?” he bit out. “What do you mean?”

The Sea Witch twisted her head far to the other side, in a languid movement like a serpent.

“I sought out her sisters,” Myrkur simmered. “And they came to her today as she stood upon the lower balcony of Perlkastel. They gave to her my gift: an enchanted blade.” Myrkur dipped low, her voice softening to almost nothing. “A blade with which to kill the new queen.”

Galahad’s pulse staggered. His mouth opened, but no words came.

“Meira has had only fifty years—so young for a mermaid, who ought to live three-hundred,” Myrkur whispered. “I gave her this chance to restore her body to its true form, and live once more in her own realm, for the full length of her rightful life.” Myrkur lifted her hands, and stretched them through the air in weird, inhuman motions. “I knew what thou wouldst do, Curse-Breaker. I knew it from the beginning. That thou wouldst give the seal to the Elfin-Blood, for she could rightfully hold it once she wed a king. And I felt it within me as thou didst perform the rite. Now, all Meira must do is strike the elfin queen through the heart, and the mermaid shall return to the sea.”

“No,” Galahad said through his teeth. “No. Meira would never do that.”

“What wouldst thou know?” Myrkur replied, laughing with the gnashing of dry jaws. “She was birthed in my waters. I felt the first beat of her heart. I have known her every movement, her every breath, her every longing. She is *selfish*, Curse-Breaker. And above all, she desires to *live*. And she hates the queen for robbing her of the man she loves.” The Sea Witch bent toward him, drowning him in stench. “She will kill the queen. And I shall have the seal.”

Silence fell. Galahad froze—but his left hand trembled on his sword. He locked gazes with the Sea Witch, feeling her slow smile wash over him.

“Release me, Curse-Breaker,” Myrkur purred. “I have no further business with thee.”

Galahad stopped breathing. The world stopped spinning.

Then—

He let go of the sword with his left hand, bit the fingers of his glove and pulled his glove off. He spat it out, then swiftly slid his palm down the side of sword.

The blade sliced a line in his skin. Pain shot up his arm.

His blood dripped into the water.

Myrkur’s whole cloak thrashed.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, recoiling.

Galahad shook his fist in the air, squeezing more blood into the frothing black waves. Fire filled his chest, heat blazed before his eyes. He spoke through his teeth.

“I am striking a new deal.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The full moon rose high over Metern as Galahad and Thondorfax raced away from the woods at the Ruined Mount, making straight for Perlkastel. His hand stung, and blood from his new wound made the reins slick. He gritted his teeth, his heart hammering, leaning down so far that Thondorfax's mane brushed his face.

They streaked over the moors, steadily downhill, until Galahad spied the watchlights of the palace. Thondorfax leaped over an obstructing hedge, flying through the air twenty feet before thundering back to earth and doubling his speed.

Hooves hit paving, and horse and rider blazed up the palace lane, skirted the gardens and bombarded the main gate.

The guards threw themselves out of their guard towers, jerking their weapons out of their scabbards before they caught sight of him.

"Wh—Stormcrane! What is the matter?" one of them cried.

"Where is Meira?" Galahad roared. "Is she still here?"

"I don't know, sir!" the other guard replied.

"Open the gates!" Galahad commanded. The guards flung themselves to the latches and hauled them open, and Galahad rode into the courtyard and straight toward the main doors. Another guard quickly heaved that door open for him, and Galahad and Thondorfax sped inside, causing a deafening clatter to resound through the palace.

"Gawain!" Galahad thundered, his tones echoing like an earthquake. "Lancelot!"

"Good lord!" came a shout at the far end—and all at once, Sir Gawain, in his nightclothes and stockings, came skidding into the hallway. "What is it?"

"Where is Meira?" Galahad demanded, pulling up in front of him.

"I…I don't know," Gawain shook his head, eyes wide. "Last I saw her, she was sitting with Beatrix—but that was long ago, before I retired to for

the night. Several coaches left, one of the ladies may have taken her back home—”

“Wake everyone up,” Galahad ordered. “Search the palace for her.”

“What is going on?” Gawain pressed. Galahad took a quivering breath.

“Her life is in danger.”

Gawain’s eyes flashed.

“What will you do?” Gawain asked.

“I am going back to Euryor House,” Galahad wheeled Thondorfax around. “Send word to me with the greatest possible haste if you find her here.”

“I will!” Gawain promised, and sped off in the other direction. Galahad pressed Thondorfax’s flanks, and together they barreled back out the corridor, through the courtyard, between the gates and out into the night.

They screamed down the garden lane and swerved into the woods, taking the forest path at a reckless speed. Night birds skittered away from them in terror, the fireflies went dark before them. Galahad’s cape caught on a branch and ripped.

Deep, throbbing pain made his entire left arm spasm. He jerked it toward his chest, grimacing, then shook his head hard and forced his vision to focus. Just then, they burst out of the forest and onto the moon-bathed moors.

They ripped down the familiar hillside track, Thondorfax’s gait churning like a squall. Galahad searched the distance, straining to catch even a glimpse of a light in a window…

A screeching crow issued from above. He jerked his head up to see Scraw’s wingspan eclipse the moon.

“Is she there?” Galahad screamed into the sky.

“Yes,” Scraw croaked in reply. “Yes, yes.”

Galahad swiped at his face—smearing blood across his cheek. Scraw dove down, curved and flew along beside them, his wing feathers touching Galahad’s shoulder.

They rounded the bend in the road, and Galahad finally saw Euyror House. Lights flickered in the library and the front parlor, and smoke curled from the chimney.

They skidded into the yard and jolted to a halt. Galahad leaped off the horse, fighting a sudden surge of dizziness, and started toward the door. Thondorfax tossed his head and clawed at the turf. Scraw dipped down and

landed heavily on Galahad's shoulder as he grabbed the door handle, flung it open, and charged inside.

"Meira!" he shouted, rattling the windows. "Meira, where are you?"

Scraw screeched and hopped off, landing on the back of a chair. Galahad stormed through the parlor, sweeping the room—

He saw her.

There, in the library.

She had just jumped to her feet from sitting at the study table. Her face had gone white, her hair wild, as if she'd walked upon the moors in a high wind. She still wore her fine blue dress, but mud coated the hem and soaked the skirt. Her wide, stark gaze met his. She reached up and questioningly tapped her own cheek, then pointed faintly to him.

All the strength left Galahad's body.

"You…" he choked, a terrible trembling covering his body. "You didn't…"

She frowned sharply, holding her breath.

Galahad risked a step inside, then another. He swallowed hard.

"You didn't do it," he gasped. "You didn't."

Understanding washed over her features.

Then, she gave him the gentlest, saddest smile he'd ever seen.

And she reached down into her pocket, and drew out a long, graceful knife.

It was made of black metal that sparkled in the lamplight. It bore a curved handle, suited to the grasp of a woman, and a wickedly-slender blade. She held it up in both hands, gazing gravely at it. Then, she lowered her head, and laid the knife on the table. It clicked as it touched the surface. She released it.

Galahad, drawn against his will, stepped further in, his attention captured by that evil blade. At last, he stood in front of her, sensing the invisible shadows twisting and snarling around the weapon. He lifted his head and desperately searched her face.

"You didn't…?" he murmured, his brow knotting.

Her quiet gaze lingered on him, that sorrowful smile returning.

And she shook her head.

Galahad released a sudden, broken sigh, and sagged forward.

Meira grabbed hold of his shoulders. Then, she caught sight of his wounded hand.

She gasped.

“Meira,” Galahad tried. “Meira, I…I summoned Myrkur.”

Her eyes flashed to his, but at the same time, she grasped the sleeve of her dress at the seam and ripped it. She tore off a long strip and snatched hold of his hand, pressing the cloth against his wide cut and binding it round and round.

“I forged a new contract,” he managed.

Meira went still. Her fingers clamped down on his hand…

And she lifted terrified eyes to his. Galahad’s breath shuddered.

“I transferred the guardianship of the seal to Beatrix,” he said. “But when I asked Myrkur to release you from the spell, she said she couldn’t.” His shaking fingers closed around hers. “So I performed my own blood spell.” He smiled weakly for an instant. “And I took the spell from you.”

Meira stared at him.

Then, slowly, she started shaking her head.

“You’ll live, Meira,” Galahad said, clearing his throat and ducking away. “I’ll die in the morning, as you would have. And when I do, you’ll be human, and have your voice back.”

Meira shook her head harder, a gasp tearing through her—and she reached up and slid her warm hands around his neck, pressing her thumbs to his temples. Galahad tried to look at her—caught sight of sudden tears in her brilliant eyes before he couldn’t bear it. He reached up to pull her hands down…

But strength failed him, and he could only hold her wrists and squeeze his eyes shut.

She released his face and grasped his collar, and shook him. He forced his eyes open again to see her still fervently shaking her head. She let go of him with one hand and snatched up a book from the table, then shoved it into his chest. He limply caught it. Meira rapidly pointed to all the other books, then rapped her knuckles on the one he held.

He shook his head.

“No, there’s no way out of this,” he murmured. “At least…Not unless I ask you to do something I know you cannot do.”

She flung the book on the floor. It hit the wood with a deafening *bang*.

She grabbed his wounded hand again in both of hers and glared fiercely at him. Twin tears spilled down her cheeks.

Galahad twisted his head and tried to wrench out of her grip—but she held onto him, clawing at his vest, wrapping her hand around his neck. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Then, all at once, she went still.

Galahad's heartbeat raged in his ears, but he didn't dare look at her again.

Her touch changed. Softened—as if she held something as delicate as glass.

And her realization hit him like a ton of stone.

His eyes flew open.

Her eyes had flooded with blue.

"Meira…" he rasped.

She clenched his wrist in both her hands, turned him, and started dragging him toward the door.

"Meira, no," he tugged against her, planting his feet.

She whirled around, striking him with a fiery stare. And before he knew what he was doing, his feet gave way, and he let her lead him out into the parlor, into the entryway, and through the front door.

Thondorfax snorted at her in greeting and stamped his feet. Meira led Galahad up to the horse, then turned and faced him. She stood still, her frame filled with an iron resolve.

But her breathing shook, and everything in her bearing asked a single question.

A question that sent splinters of agony through his heart.

She squeezed down on his wounded hand.

He bit the inside of his cheek.

And he nodded.

She let go of him, and climbed on the horse, sitting astride him. She picked up the reins, and waited.

Galahad, his muscles weak and watery, put his foot in the stirrup and managed to haul himself up behind her. She gripped his left wrist and wrapped his arm firmly around her waist. He leaned against her, dizzy again. She kept her hand on his wrist, adjusted her seat, and clicked to Thondorfax.

As if he'd simply been waiting for the word, Thondorfax broke into an eager trot, then extended to a swift canter. Galahad held onto Meira as securely as he could—but he could feel the sinking of the moon as if it were

happening inside his own body. And the edge of the coming sun burned the fringes of his mind.

Through the darkness, he made out the wide road that led down into the valley toward Megipesk. Meira simply held onto the reins, seeming to communicate with Thondorfax with only her thoughts. As they entered the borders of the town and Thondorfax struck cobbles, the stars in the east began to dim, and the scent of morning dew filled the air.

They clambered through the abandoned streets, past the trickling fountain, around a corner toward a narrow street that ended in two adjoining buildings. One was a tall, well-kept stone cottage with a thatched roof, all its windows dark. The other was a church.

Meira hiked her left leg up and over Thondorfax's neck and slid down off the horse. She struck the ground in stride and hurried up the front walk of the cottage. With both fists, she beat on the door, threatening to hammer it down.

Galahad watched her, drawing his wounded arm close to him, bracing his right hand on the front of the saddle.

In a moment, a lamp flickered on upstairs, and traveled into an inner staircase. The light then blinked in the front window, and a woman's face appeared. A face Galahad recognized: it was the milliner who had made Meira's dresses. Her eyes went wide, and the next instant she had darted to the door and opened it.

"Oh, my goodness! Lady Meira! What is the matter?" she cried, clutching the front of her housecoat. Meira made several motions with her hand, and pointed back to Galahad.

"Do you…Do you need my husband?" the woman guessed. "You need the parson?"

Galahad swayed forward and rested his forehead against Thondorfax's neck. The horse whuffled in concern.

"Good lad," Galahad whispered. "You've been a good lad, Fax..."

A yelp and a shout issued from the cottage doorway, and then the flurry of footsteps ascending a wooden staircase. A few minutes later, more ruckus disrupted the night as a masculine voice joined the woman's. Galahad managed to tilt his head and glance toward the cottage to see a kindly-faced man in a housecoat and nightcap hurrying toward him carrying a lamp, followed by his wife and Meira.

“Sir, I’m Mr. Sutton, the parson,” the man panted. “Am I…Am I to understand that you require me to perform a ceremony *now?”*

Galahad pushed himself into a sitting position, feeling his face and hands go cold.

“If you can,” he tried.

Galahad felt Meira wrap her arm around his leg and hold his knee to her chest. Mr. Sutton hoisted the lamp to see Galahad better, and his face filled with alarm.

“You are unwell, sir!” he cried. “Come inside and lie down!”

Meira grabbed Mr. Sutton’s arm and violently shook her head.

“Child, can’t you see how sick he is? He’s in no condition to—”

“It’s a spell,” Mrs. Sutton gasped, her hand fluttering to her mouth. “He’s dying of a spell!”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Mr. Sutton demanded. “What kind of spell?”

“Honestly, Carlton, don’t you ever read?” Mrs. Sutton scolded. “Help him off that horse and into the church immediately!”

“But—”

“Do it now!” she ordered. “I’ll fetch your book!” And she hiked up her skirts and pelted back toward the house.

The poor parson stammered questions after her, but finally heaved a sigh and handed the lamp to Meira.

“Take this, dear—I’ll help him down.”

Meira took the lamp from him and Mr. Sutton reached up to tug on Galahad’s shirt.

“Come on there, young man, let me assist you…”

Galahad fought to maintain his own balance, but in the end, he had to lean heavily on Mr. Sutton’s shoulders as he slid out of the saddle.

“Can you manage to walk from here?” Mr. Sutton asked him, gripping his arm.

“Yes,” Galahad murmured, straightening up. Meira passed the lantern back to Mr. Sutton, then bound her arm around Galahad’s right.

“Follow me, then,” the parson instructed, and started off toward the church. Just then, Mrs. Sutton reemerged from the house and hurried up to them, carrying a book and a set of jangling keys.

“I’ll get the door!” she called, darting in front of her husband and clattering the key into the lock. Galahad paced after them, taking measured

breaths, battling back the pain that had now worked its way into his shoulder.

The Suttons pushed through the creaking church door into the darkness. Quickly, Mrs. Sutton began lighting the candles with matches, illuminating a small, simple stone sanctuary, with wooden pews and rafters, an altar table at the far end, crowned by three-tiered stained-glass window, whose design it was impossible to distinguish, since it was still dark outside. Mrs. Sutton lit the two candles that sat on the altar table, and then handed the book to Mr. Sutton.

Galahad stopped at the beginning of the aisle. Meira's arm tightened on his, and he felt her watching him.

"Meira, you…" he began, staring at the stained-glass window. "Meira, you mustn't do this. I have…I have been prepared for death all my life. It's no stranger to me." He drew in a breath that ached. Fangs of pain had begun to sink into his neck. "This is far more dangerous for you than you realize." He lowered his head. "I would rather you…you just sit beside me, and together we can watch the sun come up through that window." He finally turned, and looked down at her.

Her crystal eyes locked with his.

"Meira, please," he whispered.

Her jaw tightened. She didn't shift her gaze.

And she shook her head.

Galahad closed his eyes.

Meira stepped forward. And, as if he were chained to her side, Galahad came with her.

They trod the length of the aisle, torture stinging up and down his whole flank with every step. At long last, they arrived at the altar, where Mr. Sutton stood, his eyebrows drawn together.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

"I am," Galahad managed, nodding once. Mr. Sutton glanced at his wife, who impatiently waved at him to go on. Mr. Sutton cleared his throat.

"I should tell you," he said. "I have never performed a ceremony for a Curse-Breaker before. It's…It's extremely different from the others." He shifted uncomfortably. "It's a far more binding contract. For you see…the wife of a Curse-Breaker will live as long as he does—as many *centuries* as he does—but if he dies, *she* will die also. Instantly."

Meira didn't stir. Galahad halfway glanced at her…

She just lifted her chin.

"And, erm…" the parson went on. "It has a very particular seal that if… Well, if it isn't true, the marriage won't bind. Do you understand?"

Meira nodded.

"Ahem. All right, then," the parson winced, and lifted his book.

Meira pulled lightly on Galahad's arm…

And he shuffled his feet, and faced her.

She took up both his hands and held them against her heart, looking unfailingly into his eyes. And he couldn't turn away.

"We gather today, in the presence of this witness, to join in bond this Curse-Breaker and this woman, in sacred trust," Mr. Sutton began. "A bond created at the forming of the world, at the very mouth of the Source. A bond surpassed by none other, for it is a willing and everlasting bond, stretching to the ends of life and beyond death. Once made, nothing can un-forge this bond, nothing can tear it loose. It takes two beings and makes them one, forever, unto the breaking of the world."

Galahad swallowed. Meira strengthened her hold on his fingers.

"Do you have rings?" Mr. Sutton asked. Meira glanced at him and shook her head. Mr. Sutton cleared his throat again.

"Very well—we'll simply continue with the vows." He straightened. "Curse-Breaker Galahad Stormcrane, do you faithfully take this woman to be your only wife, to guard and to protect, to deliver and to favor, to share her bed and her sorrows, her happiness and her defeats, her property and her poverty, her illness and her health, her children and her barrenness, unto the breaking of the world?"

Galahad's face heated, and his vision flickered. Slowly, he glanced past Mr. Sutton at the stained glass window…

Which had begun to take on a soft life in the depths of its colors. His fingers shook.

Meira squeezed them. His head came around. She lifted his hands, and pressed his knuckles to her chin.

"Yes," he breathed.

"And you, Lady Meira—do you faithfully take this Curse-Breaker to be your only husband, to guard and to protect, to deliver and to favor, to share his bed and his sorrows, his happiness and his defeats, his property and his poverty, his illness and his health, his children and his barrenness, his life *and* his death, unto the breaking of the world?"

Meira nodded.

She didn’t hesitate, she didn’t blush.

She nodded—once, with absolute firmness.

The stained-glass window began to glow. The reds flushed scarlet, the blues turned sapphire, the oranges turned to gold…

“Very well,” said the parson. “By the power given to me as a minister of the Source, I pronounce you, O man, to be the husband of this lady, you, O woman, to be the wife of this Curse-Breaker. Now let this marriage be sealed…With the kiss of true love.”

Meira let go of Galahad.

And before he could think, or move—

She took his head in her hands, leaned up, and kissed his mouth.

The sun broke through the window.

Pure golden light showered over them, flooding the sanctuary, overwhelming the candlelight.

Galahad’s eyes fell closed as Meira’s soft lips pressed fiercely to his. Colors burst in his mind, the scent of roses and sea air filled his lungs, her hands burned deliciously across the scar on his face, sending pangs down through his throat and over his chest.

Fire coursed all through his body, chasing the agony loose from the muscles in his neck, the bones of his shoulder, the sinews in his arm, the gash in his hand. As Meira pulled him into her, threading her fingers through his hair, locking her flaming mouth more deeply to his, a morning wind gusted through his soul, driving out the agony and the ache, dispelling the blackness of the Sea Witch, driving her out of his blood.

And the Source-Light within him roared back to full strength, exploding against his eyelids, nearly blinding him.

She broke the kiss.

He opened his eyes…

And drew in a long, deep, pure breath.

Meira smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling with the light of the morning.

“I love you,” she said.

Galahad blinked.

Her *voice*.

Rapturous and musical, quiet and gentle as the dawn. It rang in his ears and penetrated to his heart.

He gasped, jerking his left hand up.

It no longer hurt at all. With shuddering fingers, he unwrapped the binding Meira had tied there, and dropped it…

Utterly stunned, he flexed his hand.

His perfectly-healed hand.

His head came up. He stared wildly at Meira, who just stood there, beaming.

"You…" he stammered. "You married me." Hot tears welled up in his eyes, and tumbled down his face. "You love *me*."

Meira grinned, then let out a ringing laugh.

"Yes," she said. "I do."

Galahad captured her face in both his hands—and his mouth crashed into hers. She sucked in a startled breath, then flung her arms around his neck. He frantically loosed his arms and then wrapped them all around her, lifting her up off the floor. He kissed her mouth over and over with joyous fury—but he could hardly match her own.

And as the sunrise deluged the church, and Mr. and Mrs. Sutton laughed in happy bewilderment, the Curse-Breaker and the little mermaid lavished each other with passionate, tender kisses, breathing as one, tasting the delicious seawater of their mingled tears.

Chapter Twenty-six

Galahad took a long, drowsy breath and opened his eyes. He lay on his back on an unfamiliar bed, gazing sleepily at the rafters in the parson's upstairs guestroom. A low fire crackled in the hearth to his left, and afternoon sunlight poured in through the tall window. He stretched his left arm up and pillowed his head in his hand. And again, his eyes drifted shut as he savored the feeling of Meira's warm hand spread across his skin, just above his heart. For several minutes, he just measured the beat of his own pulse, and listened to her deep, steady breaths.

Finally, he tilted his head to the right and glanced at her.

Her head lay on his pillow, her long hair cascading over the white bedsheets. She lay on her side, with the length of her warm body pressed against his side, underneath the blankets. And her right hand rested on his bare chest, her thumb lined up with his scar.

For a long, long time, his gaze caressed her sleeping features—fresh and blushing, her curls girlishly decorating her brow, neck and shoulder. Then, trying not to stir too much, he adjusted and turned toward her, bending his elbow and laying his head on his right arm. With his left, he reached over and, very lightly, tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

She opened her eyes.

His heart skipped a beat.

She smiled at him.

"Good morning, *mo grá*," she murmured.

He said nothing—just rested his hand upon hers, and entwined their fingers. She studied him.

"What is it?" she asked softly. The sound of her tones—so strange, yet somehow utterly familiar—sent thrills all across his skin. He squeezed her hand.

"I still don't understand," he finally managed.

"What?" she wondered, her brow furrowing.

“How did you…” he tried. “When did you love *me?”*

She didn’t answer. But she freed her hand and stroked his eyebrow, then his cheekbone, and then laid it across his throat, so she could feel his pulse.

Just as he had rested his hand upon *her* throat, that aching night before the fire.

“Dóchas,” Meira whispered earnestly, her eyes shining.

Galahad closed the distance between them, deeply kissing her lips, taking her into his arms so powerfully that he could feel her heart hammer against his. And they spoke no more—for, as they had learned the moment they met that, unlike everyone else in the realm, *they* needed no speech.

“What?” Little Emblyn shrieked, her eyes big as saucers. *“What?!”*

Meira burst out laughing. Galahad just felt his face get painfully hot.

They stood in the yard of Euryor House, where Galahad had been attempting to give Thondorfax a morning bath.

He and Meira had stayed to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Sutton, all the while conveying their boundless gratitude, then traveled home to Euyor House quite late at night, when the house was dark.

Now, Galahad stood shirtless in his work trousers and boots, attempting to soak the great, muddy horse in sudsy water—interrupted by earsplitting howls from the servant girl.

“Not *only* does a palace messenger come bashing through the house at the wee hours of the morning after the wedding, shouting that Meira is *not* to be found—and then both of you are missing *all day yesterday,* but then I come in *this* morning and find *you* in the *bed with her*—” Little Emblyn screeched, jabbing a finger at him. “And then she *speaks to me*. In her *own* ruddy voice—and tells me that the two of you ran off together two nights ago and *got married!”* She flung her arms into the air, her face red as a beet. “What in all blazes is going on here?”

Meira, unable to control her laughter, collapsed back against Thondorfax’s rump, tears running down her temples. The horse snorted. Galahad rolled his eyes and flicked soap at Meira. She batted it off—Thondorfax sidestepped, and she nearly lost her balance. Which just made her double over and laugh harder.

Little Emblyn let out an incoherent roar.

“You were in love with her all the time, weren’t you?” she accused, pointing at Galahad again. “Admit it!”

“Whaaat?” Meira feigned a dramatic gasp and turned to him.

“Oh, tosh, there isn’t any use lying about it,” Little Emblyn scoffed furiously. “I saw his face every time you came into the room.”

Meira raised her eyebrows at Galahad and made an “o” with her mouth. He heaved a sigh and dunked the brush in the soapy bucket, then vigorously scrubbed Thondorfax’s flank.

“But *you* were supposed to be in love with the king!” Little Emblyn flailed her arms toward Meira. “When…When did you fall in love with… with *him?”*

Galahad shook out his right hand, sending cascades of soap suds splattering across the dirt, fighting not to look at her…

“Oh…Surely that’s just as obvious, isn’t it?” Meira asked.

He had to turn.

She stood there, gazing at him in the morning light, her plain dress half soaked, her hair coming loose of its braid, her cheeks and lips rosy, her gaze soft and laughing.

“What?!” Little Emblyn squawked again. “You too?!”

And slowly, Galahad smiled.

It warmed him through and through—especially when he saw it mirrored on Meira’s face.

“Wh…What on *earth* was *I* doing then—trying to make you the queen?” Little Emblyn sputtered. Meira came up and put her arm around Little Emblyn’s shoulders.

“You were quite busy being the dearest friend I’ve ever had,” she said, and swiftly kissed Little Emblyn on the cheek. “Will you come with me and make some breakfast?”

Little Emblyn stared at her, then gasped and let out a watery giggle, accompanied by a surprised spill of tears.

“Yes, Miss,” she managed. “I mean…I mean *Madam!”*

And arm in arm, the two young women headed back into Euryor House, Galahad’s warm gaze following them all the way.

Galahad and Meira rode upon Thondorfax up through the sun-drenched palace gardens, Scraw wafting far overhead. They rounded the palace walls and approached the gardens at a trot, peering over the hedges to the rose

beds beyond. No sooner had they paused at the garden gate than King James and Queen Beatrix flung it open and burst out in front of them. They both wore flowing, comfortable white linen, and Queen Beatrix absently held a glass of water in her hand. They stopped in front of the horse, their eyes wide and their mouths open.

"Lady Meira! Galahad!" Beatrix exclaimed. "What on earth happened?"

"We got word that Meira was in danger, but no one could find you anywhere after that!" the king cried, shooting them both scolding looks. "Where have you been?"

"Good morning, James," Meira said.

Beatrix dropped her water. The glass shattered on the paving stones.

"Good lord!" she yelped, slapping her hand to her chest. "Meira!"

"You can speak?" James stammered. "Wh…How? When did…?"

"It's a bit of a long story, Your Majesty," Meira replied gently. "One that I've been wishing very much to tell you."

"Well—by all means!" he said, beckoning to her. Meira lifted her leg over the horse's neck and hopped down—the king caught her hands and steadied her.

"I am dying to hear this," Beatrix stepped closer.

"My queen," Galahad cut in. "I'm afraid I need your attention for a moment."

"Oh!" she blinked. "Truly?"

"Just for a moment," Galahad said, swinging down from the saddle and letting go of the reins.

"Very well," she smiled at him. "Shall we walk?"

"Yes, in the palace, if we may," Galahad gestured to it. He glanced over at Meira.

"And I'll tell you my story in the garden," Meira said to the king. He nodded quickly, and held out his arm to her. She easily took it, and together they started off along the hedges.

Beatrix watched them with a little smile and narrowed eyes—and then she arched an eyebrow at Galahad.

"I admit, I am most intrigued, Curse-Breaker," she said.

Galahad held out his arm to her, and she looped hers around it. Together, they stepped back through the garden and toward the stairs that

led to the palace doorway.

"Your husband may have told you some of the reason for my being in Mhuirlan," Galahad began.

"Yes, he did," Beatrix replied as they ascended the stairs. "That your masters had detected the absence of the guardian who was to be protecting our great seal. You came to investigate what had happened to him."

"Her," Galahad corrected. "What had happened to *her*."

Beatrix stopped. She faced him, and canted her head sharply.

"Her?" she repeated, watching him intently. Galahad nodded gravely.

"It was Meira."

Beatrix's eyebrows went up.

"Meira! She…You said she was a Curse-Breaker!"

"I lied," Galahad answered. "Though, I had good reason."

"But…" Beatrix tried. "I'd always thought that the seal was guarded by merfolk!"

"It was," Galahad said.

Beatrix's mouth opened…and then she let out an astonished laugh.

"Truly?" she said. "Truly—She was a mermaid?"

"Yes," Galahad replied quietly. "But she made a bargain with Myrkur, the Sea Witch."

The mirth instantly fell away from Beatrix's face, and she stared at him.

"What bargain?"

Galahad gestured to the corridor before them, and slowly led her forward.

"That she could be human forever if she married the man she loved," Galahad said. "But she would lose her voice until then. And, if this man would *not* marry her, she would die."

"Good lord," Beatrix gasped again. "*That* is why she couldn't speak?"

"Mm," Galahad said.

"What happened?" Beatrix demanded. Their footsteps echoed down the long, pearly hallway.

"I eventually worked out a way to transfer guardianship of the seal from her to someone else," Galahad explained. "Which brings me to the reason I needed to speak to you."

Beatrix halted in the center of the corridor and faced him, her brow furrowed. Galahad took a breath, picked up her hand, and held it in both of his.

“Your Majesty,” he said gravely. “*You* are now the guardian of the Seal of Mhuirlan—and that guardianship will be taken up by your heirs, and theirs, until your house no longer rules these lands.”

“Me,” she said, her voice low. He nodded once.

“Take this,” he said, and pressed something into her hand. She turned it over, and gazed down at a glimmering blue dragon scale.

“I gave this to Meira,” he said. “She wanted you to have it. It’s a scale from the dragon king of Gormland—it bears royal, protective magic. Put it on a chain and wear it, and then pass it to your firstborn when he or she ascends to the throne. Your elvish blood already makes you strong—but this will make you even stronger.”

Beatrix closed her fingers around the scale, and held it against her heart. But then, her eyes sought his again.

“But what about Meira?” she asked. “How is it that she can speak again?”

Galahad allowed himself a ghost of a smile.

“I married her,” he murmured.

Beatrix said nothing for an instant.

Then, a vivid, glowing look filled her features.

“You did,” she whispered. She gave him a saucy smile. “I thought you might.”

He blinked.

“Oh, yes,” Beatrix said lightly, glancing up and away. “Practically the only thing we ladies talked about the night before my wedding was how madly in love with her you were.”

Galahad’s lips parted and his face grew hot—but he could think of nothing to say. The queen winked at him. He cleared his throat and looked the other way.

Just then, at the far end of the corridor, where the door opened to the garden, Meira and the king appeared in silhouette. They faced each other, clasping hands. The king leaned toward her, clearly listening with all his might. Meira spoke quietly and gravely, and Galahad could not hear what they were saying.

“Why do I get the feeling…” Beatrix mused, her shoulder brushing Galahad’s arm. “That Meira is telling him an entirely different story?”

“I believe she is,” Galahad acknowledged. “One that you should probably tell your children one day.”

He felt Beatrix give him a curious look, but he only watched as King James slowly sank to his knees before Meira, and pressed two fervent kisses to the backs of her hands. Meira freed one hand, and rested it among the king's golden curls. The king lifted his face to her and shook his head. Meira smiled at him, gripping his hands.

Then, the king arose, took hold of her, and hurried up the corridor with her in tow. And when the king came near enough, Galahad saw his beaming face shining with tears.

"My love, what is it?" Beatrix cried.

"Oh, darling—the most splendid…I can't, I must tell you later." The king leaned in and kissed his wife, but kept hold of Meira's hand. "And I must give this beautiful saint back to you!" he laughed, pushing Meira toward Galahad. Meira laughed and easily gave way, slipping her arm around Galahad's waist. He draped his arm around her shoulders, and she laid her head against the left side of his chest.

"These two were married!" The king exclaimed, waving at them and then wiping the tears from his face. "Can you believe that?"

"Yes," Beatrix gave another wink to Meira, and wrapped her arm around her own husband.

"What did he need to tell you?" the king asked her, still sniffing and drying his eyes.

"I shall tell you later," Beatrix smiled at him. "I think we'll have a very entertaining evening." And they laughed together—joined by Meira. Galahad simply bent his head, and kissed her hair.

"Well, where are you off to now?" the king asked them, pulling Beatrix in close. "Or will you manage to stay a while?"

"Unfortunately, no," Galahad said. "We're going to Anhaga."

"What's in Anhaga?" Beatrix asked.

"His parents," Meira beamed.

"Oh, indeed!" the king nodded. "Yes, you must visit them, of course." And then he gazed at Galahad, his expression turning solemn. "But truly I…I owe you two such a debt." He glanced at Meira. "What can I do to repay you?"

"I want Little Emblyn," Meira said directly.

"You—You want to take her with you?" the king asked. Meira nodded.

"I found her crying in the library this morning," she said. "And when I asked her if she wouldn't like to travel with us, she said she would, if only

you would let her.”

“By all means, then, she shall go!” the king declared. “She’s young and brave and resourceful, and she’s served you well. She deserves to see more of the world.”

“I quite agree,” Beatrix said.

“Are you to leave now, then?” the king asked—a shadow of pain crossing his face.

Galahad’s heart panged.

“Yes, this afternoon,” he answered. He took a tight breath. “But…At the very latest…we shall try to return for our anniversary.”

“Oh, yes!” Beatrix cried. “We’ll celebrate together! And we’ll have the grandest party *anyone’s* ever seen—all your masters can come.”

Meira squeezed Galahad’s waist, and at long last, he gave the king and queen a genuine smile.

“We look forward to it.”

Meira then pulled loose of Galahad, stepped in, and embraced the queen. Beatrix gladly hugged her back, playfully rocking her back and forth. Meira released her then, and turned to the king. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tight, and—with sudden emotion—the king bound her up in his embrace and pressed his face to her shoulder.

“I shall never forget you, little mermaid,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

She backed up, and kissed his forehead. More tears fell down his cheeks, but he smiled like sunshine. Meira then reached back and felt for Galahad’s hand. He took it…

But then he let go, closed the distance, and embraced the king.

The king instantly replied, holding strongly to him in return. For a moment, Galahad shut his eyes, letting the power in his heart flow through his hands, and breathed:

“Eagna.”

He felt warmth pass into the king and resonate through his frame. He backed up and took the king by the shoulders.

“Do you remember what I said to you when we first met?” he asked, holding his gaze. “That your feeling of gratitude for your life would pass?”

The king chuckled.

“I do.”

Galahad squeezed his shoulders, and shook his head.

“I don’t believe that’s true.”

The king laughed, and gave him a sincere smile.

Galahad slapped his hand down on the king's left shoulder, then let him go.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality," Galahad said. "And know that I speak with authority when I tell you that you are the kindest and most gracious monarchs in Edel."

This left them speechless for a moment—enough time for Galahad to entwine his fingers with Meira's, and to guide her toward the doorway. Together, with the king and queen in tow, they trailed down the garden steps and passed through the gate, where Thondorfax and Scraw were waiting.

"Oh!" Meira said in afterthought, spinning around. "Where are the knights? We wanted to say goodbye to them."

"I had to send them off yesterday," the king answered. "Urgent business in Albain."

Galahad frowned.

"What kind of business?"

"Apparently, some squire has pulled a sword from a stone!" the king laughed. "And now he's laying claim to the throne! I sent Lance, Tristan and Gawain that direction straightaway."

Galahad exchanged a glance with Meira.

"Perhaps," the queen spoke up. "After you've visited your parents, you may want to pay Camelot a visit?"

"Yes," Galahad mused. "We may do that."

Thondorfax snorted, and pawed the ground. The queen giggled.

"He's ready to be off!"

"Yes—he's the master, after all," Galahad smirked. He took up the reins and held the great horse still whilst Meira mounted up, and then he followed her. He settled in the saddle behind her, and then looked down at the two young monarchs. Silence fell.

At long last, he took a breath.

"Be always as good and kind and humble as you are in this moment," he said. "And your reign shall be long, prosperous, and happy."

The king and queen smiled up at them. Galahad lifted his hand in farewell, and they mirrored it. Then, he urged Thondorfax into a trot, and the great horse carried them up across the sunbathed hills, toward the Ruined Mount. Scraw, with a cackling cry, flapped out of the hedges and followed.

For half an hour, he and Meira rode at a leisurely pace, the briny gusts tossing their hair and clothes. The grasses smelled sweet and fragrant, and pink flowers bloomed beside the lane. Finally, they drew up before the ancient forest wall, and drew to a stop.

“Is this where the old fortress is?” Meira asked softly. “The Ruined Mount?”

“Yes,” Galahad answered. “I wanted to see if Myrkur was still here.”

Meira turned her head, and the crown of it touched Galahad’s chin.

“Is she?”

“No,” Galahad murmured. “She’s retreated. Gone back into the sea.”

Galahad felt Meira sigh. He closed his eyes, drinking in the smell of her—and wondered if she would always carry about her the perfume of roses and sea wind.

And, at last, he gave in to the temptation, bent his head, and tenderly kissed her neck.

She shivered and sighed again, leaning her head back on his shoulder.

“Do you want to go to Camelot?” he murmured against her skin.

“I will go wherever you go,” she whispered. “Your life is mine, remember?”

A sweet, aching agony traveled all through Galahad’s chest, and he lifted his face. She turned, and looked up at him over her right shoulder—so close to him. His gaze traced her features as he fought to form words eloquent enough…

She wrapped her right hand up around the back of his head, leaned up, and pressed a kiss to his mouth. He let go the reins and encircled her with his arms, cradling her neck with his right hand, drawing her in as close as she would come, letting the mingled winds of the moors and the seas swirl in a reckless, wild embrace around them both.

THE END

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